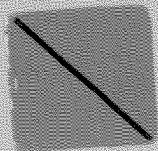


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LIVING WITH CONTRADICTIONS: CRITICAL PRACTICES IN THE AGE OF SUPPLY-SIDE AESTHETICS

BY ABIGAIL SOLOMON GODEAU

IT SHOULD HAVE BECOME abundantly clear in recent years that the function of criticism, for the most part, is to serve as a more or less sophisticated public relations or promotional apparatus. This is less a function of the critic's active partisanship (Diderot and Baudelaire, for example, are historically associated with the artists Greuze and Guys, whom they championed as exemplars) than a consequence of the fact that most contemporary art criticism is innocent of its own politics, its own interests and its own ideology. In fact, the promotional aspect of most art criticism derives from the larger institutional and discursive structures of art. In this respect, the scholarly monograph, the temporary exhibition, the discipline of art history and, last but not least, the museum itself, are essentially celebratory entities. Further – and at the risk of stating the obvious – the institutions and discourses that collectively function to construct the object 'art' are allied to the material determinations of the marketplace which themselves establish and confirm the commodity status of the work of art.

Within this system, the art critic normally functions as a kind of middleman between the delirious pluralism of the marketplace and the sanctified judgment seat that is the museum. Recently, however, even this mediating process has been by-passed; artists such as Julian Schnabel, to take one particularly egregious example, have been propelled from obscurity to the pantheon without a single serious critical text ever having been produced in support of their work. The quantum increase in the scale of the international art market, the unprecedented importance of dealers in creating (or 'managing') reputations and manipulating supply and demand, the emergence of a new class of 'art consultants',



Sherrie Levine: 'Untitled' (after Walker Evans), 1981.

¹ 'Neo-Geo', also referred to as 'Simulationism', the latest art package to blaze across the artworld firmament, is a good case in point. The artists involved (Ashley Bickerton, Peter Halley, Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, Meyer Vaisman – to name only the most prominent) were the subject of massive media promotion from the very outset. See for example, Paul Taylor, 'The Hot Four: Get Ready for the Next Art Stars', *New York Magazine*, October 27, 1986, pp 50-56; Eleanor Heartney, 'Simulationism: The Hot New Cool Art', *Artnews*, January 1987, pp 130-137; Douglas C McGill, 'The Lower East Side's New Artists, A Garment Center of Culture Makes Stars of Unknowns', *The New York Times*, June 3, 1986. The media blitz was subsequently ratified by a group exhibition at the Sonnabend Gallery and by a 1986 exhibition at the Boston Institute for Contemporary Art ('Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture') with an accompanying catalogue featuring essays by prominent art historians and critics such as Yves-Alain Bois, Thomas Crow, Hal Foster.

² Sherrie Levine quoted in Gerald Marzorati, 'Art in the (Re)Making', *Artnews*, May 1986, vol 85 no 5.

and the large-scale entry of corporations into the contemporary art market have all contributed to the effective redundancy of art criticism. Art stars and even 'movements', with waiting lists of eager purchasers in their train, stepped into the spotlight before many art critics knew of their existence.¹ This redundancy of criticism, however, can hardly be understood as a consequence of these developments alone. Rather, the current state of most art criticism represents the final dissolution of what was, in any case, only a fragile bulwark between market forces and their institutional ratification, a highly permeable membrane separating venture capital, so to speak, from blue-chip investment. As a result, art criticism has been forced to cede its illusory belief in the separateness or disinterestedness of critical discourse.

In this article I am primarily concerned with the condition – and position – of critical practices within art criticism and artmaking in the age of Reagan. In contradistinction to business-as-usual art promotion, and the atavistic, cynical and mindless art production exemplified by pseudo-expressionism, critical practices by definition must occupy an oppositional place. But what, we must ask, is that place today? Within the map of the New York art world, where is that place of opposition and what is it in opposition to? Secondly – and integrally linked to the first set of questions – we must ask what defines a critical practice and permits it to be recognised as such. What, if anything, constitutes the difference between a critical practice and a recognisably political one? If artists as dramatically distinct as, for example, David Salle and Sherrie Levine, can both say that their work contributes to a critique of the painterly sign, what common political meanings, if any, ought we attribute to the notion of critical practice? Lastly – and here is where I am most directly implicated – what is the nature, the terms, even the possibility, of a critical practice in art criticism? Is such a practice not inevitably and inescapably a part of the cultural apparatus it seeks to challenge and contest?

I. POSTMODERNIST PHOTOGRAPHY THE THIRD TIME AROUND: A CASE HISTORY

When I think of it now, I don't think what Julian Schnabel was doing was all that different from what I was trying to do. – Sherrie Levine²

By way of exploring these questions, and in the interest of providing some specificity to the discussion, I want to concentrate primarily on the evolution and development of postmodernist photographic work from the late 1970s to the present, using it as a case history in which to explore the salient issues. This corpus of work, identified with its now fully familiar strategies of appropriation and pastiche, its systematic assault on modernist orthodoxies of immanence, autonomy, presence, originality and authorship, its engagement with the simulacral, and its interrogation of the problematics of photographic mass media representation,

may be taken as paradigmatic of the concerns of a critical postmodernism or what Hal Foster has designated as 'oppositional postmodernism'³.

The qualifier 'critical' is important here, inasmuch as the conceptualisation and description of postmodernism in architecture – chronologically anterior – was inflected rather differently.⁴ There, among other things, it signalled a new historicism and/or repudiation of modernist architecture's social and utopian aspirations, and a concomitant theatricalisation of architectural form and meaning. In literary studies, the term postmodernism had yet another valency and made its appearance in literary criticism at an even earlier date.⁵ Within the visual arts, however, postmodernist photography was identified with a specifically critical stance. Critics such as Crimp *et al* theorised this aspect of postmodernist photographic work as principally residing in its dismantling of reified, idealist conceptions enshrined in modernist aesthetics – issues devolving on presence, subjectivity and aura. To the extent that this work was supported and valorised for its subversive potential (particularly with respect to its apparent fulfilment of the Barthesian and Foucauldian prescriptions for the death of the author, and, by extension, its subversion of the commodity status of the art object) Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince were perhaps *the* emblematic figures. For myself, as a photography critic writing in opposition to the academicised mausoleum of late modernist art photography, part of the interest of the work of Vikkie Alexander, Victor Burgin, Sarah Charlesworth, Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons and Jim Welling (to cite only those I have written about), lay in the way their work directly challenged the pieties and proprieties with which art photography had carved a space for itself precisely as a modernist art form.⁶ Further, the feminist import of this work – particularly in the case of Kruger and Levine – represented a theoretically more sophisticated and necessary departure from the essentialism and literalism prevalent in many of the feminist art practices that emerged in the '70s.⁷

In retrospect, Levine's production of the late '70s to the present reveals both the strength and weakness of this variant of critical postmodernism as a counter-strategy to the regnant forms of art production and discourse. The changes in her practice, and the shifts in the way her work has been discursively positioned and received, are themselves testimony to the difficulty and contradiction that attend critical practices which operate squarely within the framework of high art production.

Levine's work first drew critical notice in the late 1970s, a period in which the triumph of the right was as much manifest in the cultural sphere as in the political one. As one might well have predicted for a time of intense political reaction, these symptoms of morbidity included the wholesale resurrection of easel painting exemplified by German, Italian and American pseudo-expressionism, a wholesale retrenchment against the modest gains of minority and feminist artists, a repression (or distortion) of the radical art practices of the preceding decade, a ghastly

³ See Hal Foster, 'Postmodernism: A Preface', in Hal Foster (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend, Bay Press, 1983, pp ix-xvi. See also Douglas Crimp, 'Pictures', in Brian Wallis (ed), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Boston, David R Godine, 1984, pp 175-187; 'On the Museum's Ruins', in Hal Foster, *op cit*, pp 43-56; 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism', *October* 15, Winter 1980, pp 91-101; 'The End of Painting', in *October* 16, Spring 1981, pp 69-86; 'The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject', in *Parachute* 22, Spring 1981, pp 32-37.

⁴ See Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenor, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1972, and Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, New York, Rizzoli, 1977.

⁵ The literary critics Irving Howe and Harry Levin employed the term in the 1950s.

⁶ See Abigail Solomon Godeau, 'Winning the Game When the Rules have Been Changed: Art Photography and Postmodernism', *Screen* November-December 1984, vol 25 no 6, pp 88-102 and 'Photography After Art Photography' in Brian Wallis, *op cit*, pp 75-84.

⁷ The occlusion of feminism from the postmodernist debate, remarked upon by Andreas Huyssen, among others, is significant. It is by no means incidental that many, if not most, of the central figures within oppositional postmodernism in the visual arts, film and video, have been women, and much of the work they have produced has been directly concerned with feminist issues as they intersect with the problematics of representation. But see footnote 16.

⁸ On the implications of the revival of pseudo-expressionism see Benjamin H D Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Repression' in Brian Wallis, op cit, pp 107-136, and 'Documenta 77: A Dictionary of Received Ideas', October 22, Fall 1982, pp 105-126; Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Representing the Big City' in Irit Rogoff and Mary Anne Stevens (eds), *German Art in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, and with Cara Gendel Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', October 31, Winter 1984, pp 91-111; Craig Owens, 'Honor, Power, and the Love of Women', *Art in America*, January 1982, pp 12-15.

⁹ Literally, 'art knowledge'.

revival of the mythology of the heroicised (white male) artist and, lastly, the institutional consolidation and triumphant legitimisation of photography as a fully 'auratic' subjectivised, autonomous, fine art.⁸

Against this backdrop, one aspect of Levine's work consisted of directly rephotographing from existing reproductions a series of photographs by several canonised masters of photographic modernism (Edward Weston's nude studies of his son Neil, Eliot Porter's technicolor landscapes, Walker Evans' FSA pictures) and presenting the work as her own. With a dazzling economy of means, Levine's pictures deftly upset the foundation stones (authorship, originality, subjective expression) on which the integrity and supposed autonomy of the work of art is presumed to rest. Moreover, her selection of stolen images was anything but arbitrary; always the work of canonised male photographers, the contents and codes of these purloined images were chosen for their ideological density (the classical nude, the beauty of nature, the Depression poor) and then subjected to a demystifying scrutiny enabled and mobilised by the very act of (re)placing them within quotation marks. Finally, the strategy of fine-art-photography appropriations had a tactical dimension. For these works were produced in the wake of the so-called photography boom – meaning not simply the cresting of the market for photographic vintage prints, but the wholesale reclassification of all kinds of photography to conform with *Kunstwissenschaft*⁹-derived notions of individual style and authorial presence.

It goes without saying that Levine's work of this period, considered as a critical practice (feminist, deconstructive and literally transgressive – the Weston and Porter works prompted ominous letters from their estate lawyers) could only make its critique visible within the compass of the art world; the space of exhibition, the market framework, art (or photography) theory and criticism. Outside this specialised site, a Sherrie Levine could just as well be a 'genuine' Edward Weston or a 'genuine' Walker Evans. This, in fact, was one of the arguments made from the left with the intention of countering the claims for the critical function of work such as Levine's and Prince's (Prince at that period was rephotographing advertising images, excising only the text). The force of this criticism hinged on the works' insularity, its adherence to, or lack of contestation of, the artworld frame, and – more pointedly – its failure to articulate an alternative politics, an alternative vision.

In 1982, for example, Martha Rosler wrote an article entitled 'Notes on Quotes' focusing on the inadequacies of appropriation and quotation as a properly *political* strategy:

What alternative vision is suggested by such work? [She is referring here specifically to Levine] We are not provided the space within the work to understand how things might be different. We can imagine only a respite outside social life – the alternative is merely Edenic or Utopian. There is no social life, no personal relations, no groups, classes, nationalities; there is no pro-

*duction other than the production of images. Yet a critique of ideology necessitates some materialistic grounding if it is to rise above the theological.*¹⁰

Rosler's use of the term 'theological' in this context points to one of the central debates in and around the definition – or evaluation – of critical practice. For Rosler, failure to ground the artwork in 'direct social analysis' reduces its critical gesture to one of 'highlighting' rather than 'engaging with political questions that challenge . . . power relations in society'. Moreover, to the extent that the art work 'remains locked within the relations of production of its own cultural field', and limited to the terms of a generic rather than specific interrogation of forms of domination, it cannot fulfil an educative, much less transformative, function.

But 'theological', in its opprobrious sense, can cut both ways. It is, in fact, a 'theological' notion of the political – or perhaps one should say a scriptural notion – that has until quite recently effectively occluded issues of gender and subjectivity from the purview of the political. Rosler's objections are to some degree moored in a relatively traditional conception of what constitutes the political in art ('materialistic grounding', 'direct social analysis'). Thus, Rosler's characterisation of a purely internal critique of art as ineffective because theological, can from a somewhat different vantage point be interpreted as a theologised notion of the political. It is, moreover, important to point out that while unambiguously political artists (unambiguous because of their choice of content) are rarely found wanting for their total exclusion of considerations of gender, feminist artists are frequently chastised by left critics for the inadequacy of *their* political content. Nevertheless, the echoing cry of the women's movement – the personal is political – is but one of the remappings of political terrain that have engendered new ways of thinking the political and new ways of inscribing it in cultural production.

But perhaps even more importantly, to the extent that art is itself a discursive and institutional site, it surely entails its own critical practices. This has in fact been recently argued as the significance and legacy of the historical avant-garde.¹¹ For Peter Burger, the Kantian conception of self-criticism is understood not in Greenberg's sense of a *telos* of purity and essence, but rather, as a critical operation performed within and upon the *institution* of art itself. Thus, art movements like Dada and Constructivism, art practices such as collage, photomontage, or the Duchampian ready-made are understood to be performing a specifically political function to the extent that they work actively to break down the notion of aesthetic autonomy and to rejoin art and life. Burger's rigorous account of art as an institution in bourgeois culture provides a further justification for considering internal critiques such as Levine's as a genuinely critical practice. Cultural sites and discourses are in theory no less immune to contestation, no less able to furnish an arena for struggle and transformation than any other.¹² This 'in theory' needs to be acknowledged here because the subsequent 'success' of postmodernist

¹⁰ Martha Rosler, 'Notes on Quotes', *Wedge* 3, 1982, p 72. •

¹¹ Peter Burger, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (trans by Michael Shaw), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

¹² The theorisation of a localised 'site specificity' for contestatory and oppositional practices is one of the legacies of Louis Althusser and, with a somewhat different inflection, Michel Foucault. See Michel Foucault, 'The Political Function of the Intellectual', *Radical Philosophy*, no 12, London, pp 12-15, Summer 1977, and 'Revolutionary Action: "Until Now"' in Donald F. Bouchard (ed), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice; Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, pp 218-233.

photography as a *style* harkens back, as I shall argue, to problems of function, of critical complicity, and the extreme difficulty of maintaining a critical edge within the unstable spaces of internal critique.

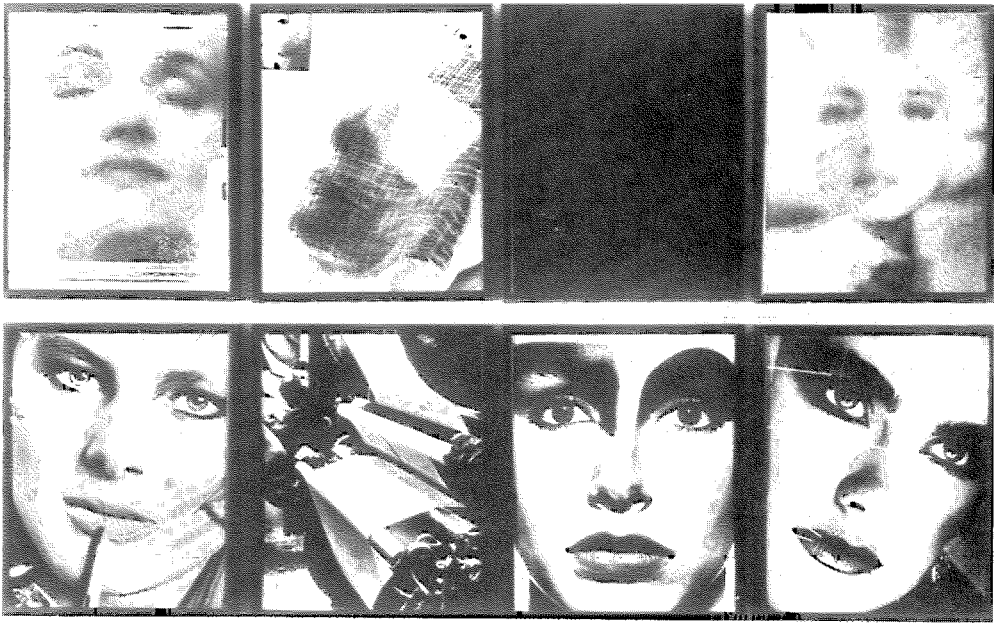
In the spring of 1982 I curated an exhibition entitled 'The Stolen Image and its Uses' for an alternative space in upstate New York. Of the five artists included (Alexander, Kolbowski, Kruger, Levine and Prince) Levine was by far the most controversial and sparked the most hostility. It was, in fact, the very intensity of the outrage her work provoked (nowhere greater than among the ranks of art photographers) that appeared at the time to confirm the subversive effects of her particular strategies. But even while such exhibitions or lectures on Levine were received outside New York with indignation, a different kind of appropriation of existing imagery, drawn principally from the mass media, was beginning to be accorded theoretical recognition across a broad range of cultural production. It was less easy to see this kind of appropriation as critically motivated. Fredric Jameson, for example, could in part identify his conception of postmodernism with the strategies of appropriation, quotation and pastiche.¹³ That these strategies could then be said to unify within a single field of discourse the work of Jean-Luc Godard and the work of Brian DePalma constitutes a problem for critical practice. Not only did such an undifferentiated model suppress a crucial consideration of (political and aesthetic) difference, it also implied the impossibility of cultural opposition within a totalising system, a position accorded growing intellectual prestige within the art world via the later writings of Jean Baudrillard. Rooted in such a framework, an appropriative strategy such as Levine's (although Jameson does not mention the specific practice of appropriation) could only figure as a synecdochal symptom within a master narrative on postmodernism.¹⁴

By 1983, plundering the pages of glossy magazines, shooting advertisements from the television set, or 'simulating' photographic tableaux that might have come from either of these media, had become as routine an activity in the more sophisticated art schools as slopping paint on canvas. In January of that year the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia mounted an exhibition entitled 'Image Scavengers'. Included in the exhibition were representatives of the first wave of appropriators and pasticheurs (Kruger, Levine, Prince, Cindy Sherman) and several other artists whose work could only be allied to the former by virtue of their formal devices alone. Invited to contribute a catalogue essay, Douglas Crimp was clearly disturbed at the domestication of what he had himself theorised as the critical potential of photographic appropriation. Under the title 'Appropriating Appropriation', his essay initiated a reconsideration of the adequacy of appropriation as a critical mode. 'If all aspects of the culture use this new operational mode,' he wrote, 'then the mode itself cannot articulate a specific reflection upon that culture.'¹⁵ Thus, while appropriative and quotational strategies had now become readily identifiable as a descriptive hallmark of

¹³ See Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* no 146, July-August 1984, pp 53-92. An earlier, less developed version of this essay entitled 'Post-Modernism and Consumer Society' is reprinted in Hal Foster, *op cit*, pp 111-125.

¹⁴ For various critiques of Jameson's arguments see Mike Davis, 'Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism', *New Left Review* no 151, May-June 1985, pp 107-118; Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', *New Left Review* no 152, July 1985, pp 60-73; and Douglas Crimp, 'The Postmodern Museum', *Parachute*, forthcoming.

¹⁵ Douglas Crimp, 'Appropriating Appropriation', in *Image Scavengers*, exhibition catalogue, University of Pennsylvania, Institute of Contemporary Art, December 1982-January 1983, p 27.



postmodern culture, the terms by which it might once have been understood to be performing a critical function had become increasingly obfuscated and difficult to justify.

Silvia Kolbowski:
'Model Pleasure,
Part 5', 1983.

By this time, Levine's practice had itself undergone various alterations. In 1982, she had largely abandoned photographic appropriations and was confiscating German Expressionist works, either by rephotographing them from book reproductions, or by framing the reproductions themselves. In 1983 and 1984, however, she began making handmade watercolour and pencil copies after artbook illustrations, extending her *oeuvre*, so to speak, to include non-Expressionist modern masters such as Malevich and El Lissitzky. Her copies after Expressionist drawings such as Egon Schiele's contorted and angst-ridden nudes were particularly trenchant comments on the pseudo-expressionist revival; master drawings are, after all, especially privileged for their status as intimate and revealing traces of the artist's unique subjectivity. In 1985, Levine made what might, or might not, be considered a radical departure from her earlier work and began to produce quite beautiful small scale paintings on wood panels. These were geometrical abstractions – mostly stripes – which, Janus-like, looked backward to late modernist works or minimalism and forward to the most recently minted new wave in the art world – Neo-Geo. Additionally, she accompanied her first exhibition of this new work with unpainted panels of wood in which one or two of the knots had been neatly gilded.

Mutatis mutandis, Levine had become a painter, although I would argue, still a somewhat singular one. Her work, moreover, had passed

¹⁶ Craig Owens' 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism', in Hal Foster, op cit, pp 57-82, is an important exception.

¹⁷ Sherrie Levine quoted in Gerald Marzorati, op cit, p 97.

¹⁸ These activities consisted of tactical interventions into the mechanisms of publicity, display and curatorship which served to focus attention on the framing conditions of art production, thereby revealed to be integral, rather than supplemental, to the field as a whole. See Andrea Fraser, 'In and Out of Place', *Art in America*, June 1985, pp 122-128; Kate Linker, 'Rites of Exchange', *Artforum*, November 1986, pp 99-100; Craig Owens, review of Levine/Lawler exhibition, *Art in America*, Summer 1982, p 148; Guy Bellavance, 'Dessaissiment Re-appropriation', *Parachute*, January-February 1982/3; Benjamin H D Buchloh, 'Allegorical Procedures', op cit; Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine, 'A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything', *Wedge 2*, Fall 1982, pp 58-67.

¹⁹ That the official museum version of modernism we inherit is in every sense partial, and more importantly, founded on these exclusions and repressions is as a recurring theme in Benjamin H D Buchloh's essays. See

from the relatively marginalised purview of the *succès d'estime* to a new visibility (and respectability) signalled, for example, by her cover article in the May 1986 *Artnews*. In several of the comments she made to her interviewer, Levine explained her need to distance herself from the kind of critical partisanship that had not only helped establish her reputation, but – more importantly – had to a great degree developed its position and analysis in relation to her work. Levine's professed discomfort with a body of critical writing that positioned her as a critical, indeed an adversarial presence, hinged on two factors. In championing Levine's work as either a poststructuralist exemplum, or a demolition derby on the property relations that subtend the integrity of the art object, the (mostly male) critics who had written about her had overlooked, or repressed, the distinctly feminist import of her work.¹⁶ But Levine also took issue with the interpretation of her work that stressed its materialist critique. In this regard, Levine insisted that hers was an aesthetic practice that implied no particular quarrel with the economic determinations of cultural production. Consequently, insofar as her critical supporters had emphasised those aspects of her work that subverted the commodity status of the art work and demolished those values Walter Benjamin designated as the 'theology of art', Levine began to feel that her activity as an artist was itself being repressed:

I never thought I wasn't making art and I never thought of the art I was making as not a commodity. I never thought that what I was doing was in strict opposition to what else was going on – I believed I was distilling things, bringing out what was being repressed. I did collaborate in a radical reading of my work. And the politics were congenial. But I was tired of no one looking at the work, getting inside the frame. And I was getting tired of being represented by men.¹⁷

The repositioning of Levine's work, both with respect to its meaning (now presented as a form of troubled obsequy mourning 'the uneasy death of modernism') and the nature of her activity (commodity making) is disturbing from a number of perspectives. First of all, it involves its own forms of historical repression. Thus, nowhere in the article was any reference made to Levine's two-year collaboration with the artist Louise Lawler enacted under the title 'A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything'.¹⁸ What is troubling about such an omission is that it parallels – no doubt wholly unintentionally – the institutional and discursive repressions that construct partial and falsified histories of art in the first place and in which the exclusion of women and radical practices are particularly conspicuous.¹⁹ Second, it repressed the active support of women critics, such as myself and Rosalind Krauss. But more ominously, it traces a move from a position of perceptible cultural resistance to one of accommodation with existing modes of production and an apparent capitulation to the very desires the early work put in question.

Whether this move is to be understood strategically (the need to be

visible, the need to survive) or developmentally (an internal evolution in the artist's work) is not in itself a useful question. What is far more important to consider here are material and discursive forces that both exceed and bind the individual artist. Whether artists choose to publicly define their positions in opposition to, or in strategic alliance with, dominant modes of cultural production is important only insofar as such definitions may contribute to a collective space of opposition. But in the absence of a clearly defined oppositional sphere and the extreme rarity of collaborative practice, attempts to clarify the nature of critical practice must focus on the art work's ability to question, to contest, or to denaturalise the very terms in which it is produced, received, and circulated. What is at stake is thus not an ethics or a moral position, but the very possibility of a critical practice within the terms of art discourse. And as a fundamental condition of possibility, critical practices must constantly address those economic and discursive forces that perpetually threaten to eradicate their critical difference.

Some notion of the juggernaut power of these forces can be obtained from a consideration of the parallel fortunes of Levine's earlier photographic appropriations and, indeed, postmodernist photography as a whole. In 1985, for example, three large group exhibitions featuring postmodernist photography were mounted in New York City alone – 'Signs of the Real' at White Columns, 'The Edge of Illusion' at the Burden Gallery, and most grotesquely of all, 'In the Tradition of: Photography' at Light Gallery. Not least of the ironies attendant upon the incorporation of postmodernist photography into the now expanded emporium of photography was the nature of the venues themselves: the Burden Gallery was established in January 1985 to function as the display window of *Aperture*, the photographic publication founded by Minor White and customarily consecrated to modernist art photography; Light Gallery, a veritable cathedral of official art photography, represents the stable of officially canonised modernist masters, living and dead. The appearance of postmodernist photography within the institutional precincts of art photography signalled that whatever difference, much less critique, had been attributed to the work of Levine *et al*, it had now been fully and seamlessly recuperated under the sign of art photography, an operation that might be characterised as deconstruction in reverse.

How had this happened? The Light Gallery exhibition title – 'In the Tradition of: Photography' – provides one clue, elaborated in an essay that accompanied the show. Postmodernist photography is here understood to be that which follows modernist photography in the same fashion that Post-Impressionism is thought to follow Impressionism. The first of the two epigraphs that introduced the essay were taken from Beaumont Newhall's *History of Photography* – a sentence describing the conservatism of pictorial, i.e., pre-modernist, art photography (that which preceded the Light Gallery regulars). The second epigraph consisted of two sentences from one of my essays, 'Photography After Art

also Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Representing the Big City', op cit, and Douglas Crimp, 'The Art of Exhibition' and 'The Postmodern Museum', op cit. In this latter essay, certain problems in Fredric Jameson's theorisation of postmodernist culture are seen to derive from his acceptance of the official, museological and *auteurist* version of modernism.

²⁰ Martha Rosler, *The Bowerly in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, Halifax, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1977.

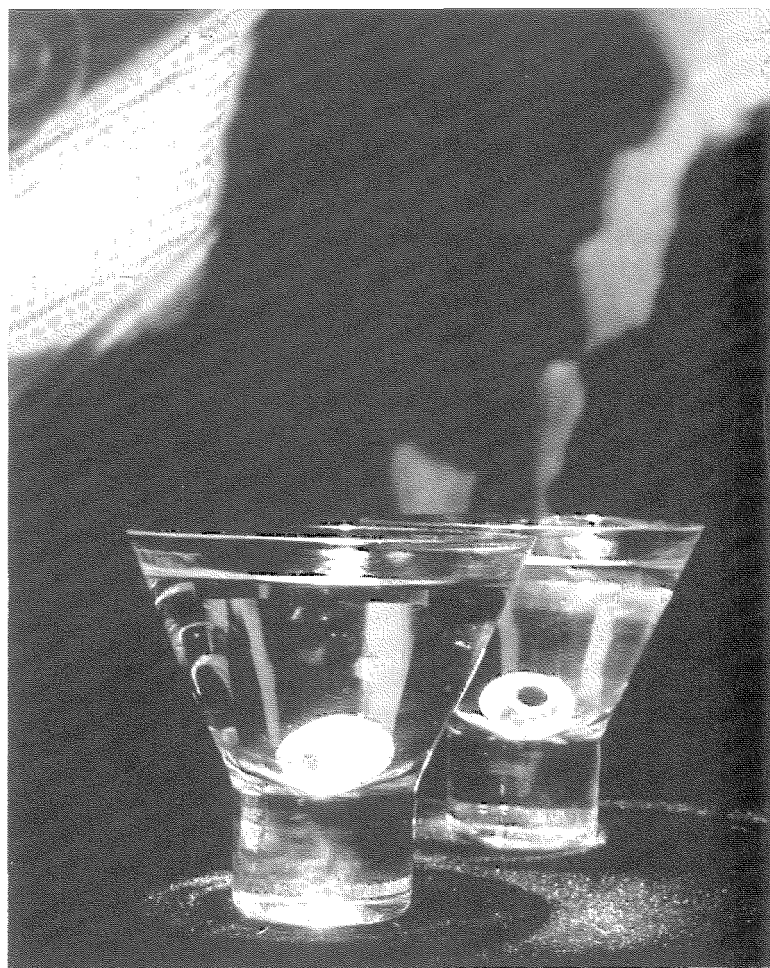
Photography', asserting that the stakes that differentiate the two modes are a function of their position in relation to their institutional spaces. In much the same way that the modernist hagiographer Beaumont Newhall and I were equally useful in framing the thesis that postmodernist photography is part of an evolutionary *telos* having only to do with the internal development of art photography, so too did the gallery space both frame and render equivalent the two practices. This reduction of difference to sameness (a shorthand description for the eventual fate of most, if not all, initially transgressive cultural practices) was emblematically represented by the pairing – side by side – of a Sherrie Levine rephotograph of a Walker Evans and – what else? – a 'real' Walker Evans beneath the exhibition title.

That postmodernist photographic work and art photography came to inhabit the same physical site (although with the exception of the Levine/Evans coupling, the two were physically separated in the installation) is of course integrally linked with the nature of commercial space in the first place. In the final analysis, as well as a Marxist analysis, it is the market which is the ultimate legitimatiser and leveller. Thus, among the postmodernist work one could also find excerpts from Martha Rosler's incisive and ground-breaking project, *The Bowerly in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (originally intended as a gallery work and subsequently published as an artist's book by the press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1977).²⁰ Various an uncompromising critique of conventional humanist muckraking documentary photography, a text/image art work, and an examination of the structuring absences and ideological freight of representational systems, *The Bowerly* was exhibited at Light amidst the range of postmodernist photographs and bore a purchase price of 3,500 dollars (one was required to purchase the entire set). Although Rosler may have intended her inclusion – and its price tag – to function as a critical intervention, its presence within a postmodernist photographic bazaar effectively negated even the appearance of critique. But what was finally even more disconcerting than the effect of going from the part of the gallery in which the Aaron Siskinds, Cartier-Bressons, and Paul Strands hung to the part devoted to the postmodernists, was the revelation that postmodernist photography, once conceived as a critical practice, had become a 'look', an attitude, a *style*.

Within this newly constructed stylistic unity, the critical specificity of a Rosler, a Prince, a Levine, could only with difficulty (and only with prior knowledge) be reconstituted. In large part, and in this particular instance, this was a consequence of the inclusion of a 'second generation' of postmodernist photographers – Frank Majore, Alan Belcher, Stephen Frailey, and so forth – whose relation to the sources and significance of their appropriative strategies (primarily advertising) seemed to be predominantly a function of fascination. Insofar as stupified or celebratory fascination produces an identification with the image world of commodity culture no different from the mesmerisation of any other consumer, the possibility of critique is effectively precluded. Frank

Majore's simulations of advertising tableaux employing props such as trimline telephones, champagne glasses, pearls, or busts of Nefertiti, all congealed in a lurid bath of '50s-like photographic colour, are cases in point. By reproducing the standard devices of colour advertising (which Majore, as a professional art director is intimately familiar with) and providing enough modification to accentuate their kitsch qualities and eroticism, Majore succeeds in doing nothing more than reinstating the schlocky glamour of certain kinds of advertising imagery within the institutional space of art. But unlike the strategies of artists such as Duchamp, or Warhol, or Levine, what is precisely *not* called into question is the institutional frame itself.²¹ The alacrity with which this now wholly academicised practice was institutionally embraced by 1985 (in that year Majore had one-person shows at the International Center of Photography, 303 Gallery and the Nature Morte gallery, all in New

²¹ My use of the term 'institutional frame' is intended in its broadest, most inclusive sense. Thus, what is at issue is not simply the physical space that the artwork inhabits, but the network of interrelated discourses (art criticism, art history), and the sphere of cultural production itself as a site of ideological reproduction within the social formation.



Frank Majore:
'Cocktails', 1983.

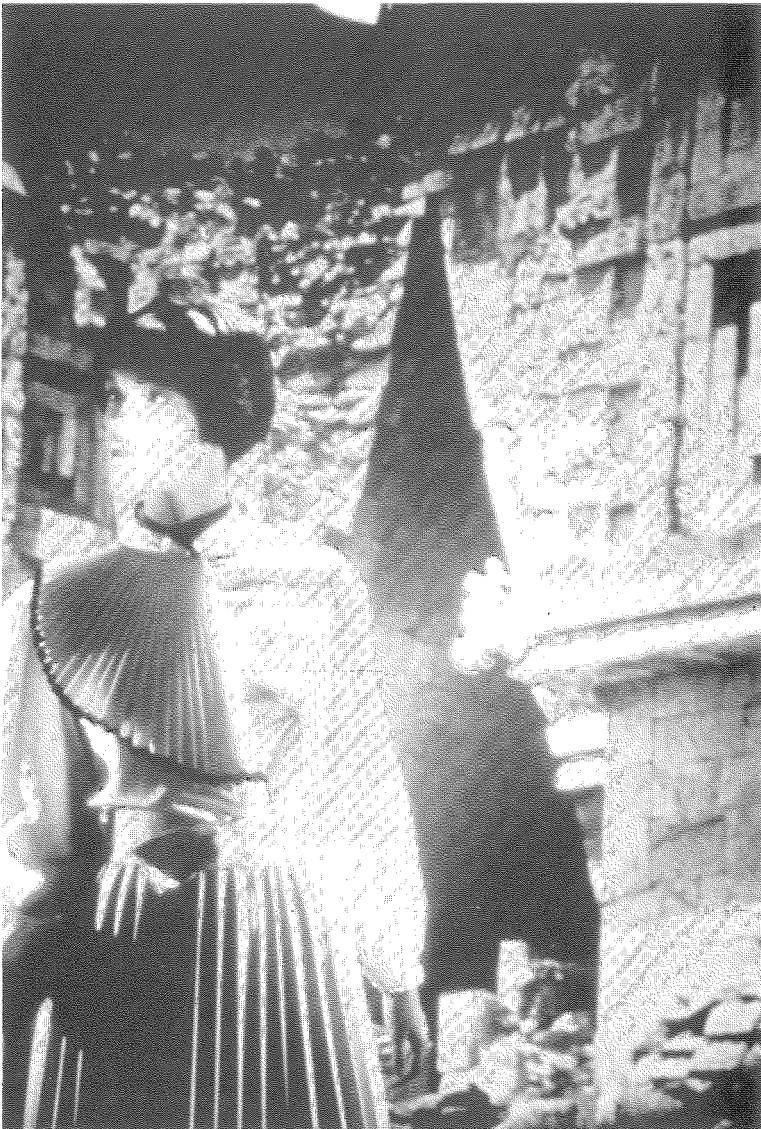
York City) was possible precisely because so little was called into question.

While this more recent crop of postmodernist artists could only become visible – or saleable – in the wake of the success of their predecessors, the shift from margin to centre had multiple determinations. 'Centre', however, must be understood in relative terms. The market was and is dominated by painting – and the prices for photographic work, despite the prevalence of strictly limiting editions and employing heroic scale, are intrinsically lower. Nonetheless, the fact remains that in 1980, the work of Levine or Prince was largely unsaleable and quite



Advertisement for
Christian Dior
Separates, 1987.

literally incomprehensible to all but a handful of critics and a not much larger group of other artists. When this situation substantially changed, it was not *primarily* because of the influence of critics or the efforts of dealers. Rather, it was a result of three factors: the self-created cul-de-sac of art photography which foreclosed the ability to produce anything new for a market which had been constituted in the previous decade; a vastly expanded market with new types of purchasers; and the assimilation of postmodernist strategies back into the mass culture which had in part engendered them. This last development may be said to characterise postmodernist photography the third time around, rendering it both



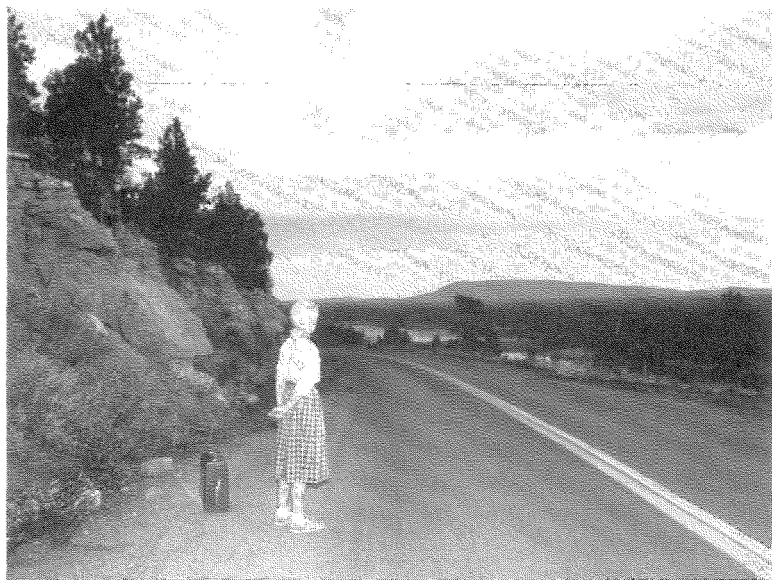
Laurie Simmons:
'Aztec Crevice', 1984.

comprehensible and desirable and simultaneously signalling its near-total assimilation into those very discourses (advertising, fashion, media) it professed to critique. The current spate of Dior advertisements, for example, featuring a black and white photograph from the '50s on which a contemporary model (photographed in colour) has been montaged bears at least a family resemblance to the recent work of Laurie Simmons. But where Simmons' pictures of this type derive their mildly unsettling effects from a calculated attempt to denaturalise an advertising convention, the reappearance of the same montage tactic in the new Dior campaign marks the completion of a circuit which begins and ends in the boundless creativity of modern advertising.

The cultural loop that can be traced here is itself part of the problematic of critical practice. The more or less rapid domestication and commodification of art practices initially conceived as critical has been recognised as a central issue at least since the Frankfurt School. This means that irrespective of artistic intention or initial effect, critical practices not specifically calibrated to resist recuperation as aesthetic commodities almost immediately succumb to this process. In this respect, the only difference between the fate of postmodernist photography and previous practices is the rapidity of the process and the ease, if not enthusiasm, with which so many of the artists accommodated themselves to it.

As was the case with its pop art predecessors, the first wave of postmodernist photography pillaged the mass media and advertising for its 'subject', by which I include its thematics, its codes, its emblems. These were then variously repositioned in ways that sought to de-naturalise the conventions that encode the ideological, and in so doing, to make those very ideological contents available to scrutiny and contestation. Thus, Cindy Sherman's black and white movie stills – always her and never her – aped the look of various film genres to underscore their conventionality while her infinite tabulation of the 'images of women' they generate revealed their status as equally conventionalised signs producing a category (woman) and not a subject. Additionally, the cherished notion of the artist's presence *in* the work was challenged by the act of literally inscribing the author herself and revealing her to be both fictional and absent.²² Similarly, Richard Prince's rephotographs of the Marlborough Man advertisements, which he began to produce in the early years of the Reagan administration, pointedly addressed the new conservative agenda and its ritual invocations of a heroic past. Here too, the jettisoning of authorial presence was a component of a larger project. By focusing on the image of the cowboy – the individualistic, masculinist icon of American mythology – Prince made visible the connections between cultural nostalgia, the *mythos* of the masculine, and political reaction. Recropping, rephotographing, and recontextualising the Marlborough men permitted Prince to unpack the menace, aggression and atavism of such representations and reveal their analogical link to current political rhetoric.

²² This aspect of Sherman's work was of particular importance to critics such as Douglas Crimp. For an interpretation of Sherman's photographs that stress their feminist critique, see Judith Williamson, 'Images of "Woman"', *Screen* November-December 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 102-116.



Cindy Sherman,
'Untitled Film Still',
1979.

In contrast to practices such as these, work such as Majore's abjures critique, analysis and intervention either on its purported object – the seductiveness of commodity culture, the hypnotic lure of simulacra – or the material, discursive and institutional determinations of art practice itself. Not surprisingly, the disappearance of a critical agenda, however construed, has resulted in an apparent collapse of any hard and fast distinction between art and advertising. In pop, this willed collapse of the aesthetic into the commercial function carried, at least briefly, a distinctly subversive charge. The erasure of boundaries between high and low culture, high art and commodity, operated as an astringent bath in which to dissolve the transcendentalist legacy of abstract expressionism. Moreover, the strategic repositioning of the images and objects of mass culture within the gallery and museum reinstated the investigation and analysis of the aesthetic as an ideological function of the institutional structures of art. Postmodernism as style, on the other hand, eliminates any possibility of analysis in so far as it complacently affirms the interchangeability, if not the co-identity, of art production and advertising, accepting this as a given instead of a problem.

Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this celebratory collapse was an exhibition mounted this winter at the International Center of Photography entitled 'Art & Advertising: Commercial Photography by Artists'.²³ Of the nine artists represented, four came from the ranks of art photography (Sandi Fellman, Barbara Kasten, Robert Mapplethorpe, Victor Schrager), two from the first wave of postmodernist photography (Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons) and two from the second (Stephen Frailey and Frank Majore) and William Wegman, whose work, which has encompassed both video and conceptualism, falls clearly into none

²³ 'Art & Advertising: Commercial Photography by Artists', International Center of Photography, Sept. 14-Nov. 9, 1986.

of these camps. As in the numerous gallery and museum exhibitions organised in the preceding years, the new ecumenicism that assembles together modernist art photography and postmodernist photography functions to establish a familial harmony, an elision of difference to the profit of all.

Addressing the work of Frailey, Majore, Simmons and Sherman, the curator Willis Hartshorn had this to say:

The art of Stephen Frailey, Frank Majore, Laurie Simmons and Cindy Sherman shares a concern for the operations of mass media representation. For these artists to work commercially is to come full circle, from art that appropriates the mass media image, to commercial images that reappropriate the style of their art. However, for the viewer to appreciate this transformation implies a conscious relationship to the material. The viewer must understand the functions that are being compared through these self-referential devices. Otherwise, the juxtapositions that parody the conventions of the mass media will be lost.²⁴

Now firmly secured within the precincts of style, postmodernist photography's marriage to commerce seems better likened to a love match than a wedding of convenience. Deconstruction has metamorphosed into appreciation of transformation, while the exposure of ideological codes has mellowed into self-referential devices. And in so far as the museum in the age of Reagan can institutionally embrace and legitimise both enterprises – art and commerce – Hartshorn is quite right in noting that a full circle has been described. For those for whom this is hardly cause for rejoicing, the history of postmodernist photography is cautionary rather than exemplary.



Richard Prince:
'Untitled' (Cowboy
Kneeling), 1982.

The notion of a critical practice, whether in art production or criticism, is notoriously hard to define. And in so far as critical practices do not exist in a vacuum, but derive their forms and meanings in relation to their changing historical conditions, the problem of definition must always be articulated in terms of the present. Gauging the *effectiveness* of critical practices is perhaps even more difficult. By any positivist reckoning, John Heartfield's covers for *AIZ* had no discernible effect on the rise of fascism, although he was able to draw upon two important historic conditions unavailable to contemporary artists (a mass audience and a definable left culture). Still, the work of Heartfield retains its crucial importance in any consideration of critical practice in so far as it fulfils the still valid purpose of making the invisible visible, and integrally meshing the representation of politics with the politics of representation. In other words, its critical function is both externally and internally inflected.

While Heartfield is clearly a political artist, few contemporary artists concerned with critical practice are comfortable with the appellation 'political': first, because to be thus defined is almost inevitably to be ghettoised within a (tiny) art world preserve; second because the use of the term as a label implies that all other art is *not* political; and third, because the term tends to suggest a politics of content and to minimise, if not efface, the politics of form. It is for all these reasons that throughout this article I have chosen to employ the term 'critical practice' in lieu of 'political practice'. That said, the immediate difficulty of definition must still be addressed, and it is made no easier by the fact that a spate of recent practices – so-called Simulationism, Neo-Geo, postmodernist photography in all its avatars – lays claim to the mantle of critical practice. Whether one is to take such claims at face value is another matter. But if we assume that critical practices conceptually assume both an activity and a position, the emphasis needs to be placed on discursive and institutional function. In this regard, Walter Benjamin's rhetorical question of 1938 is still germane: 'Rather than ask, "What is the *attitude* of a work to the relations of production of its time?" I should like to ask, "What is its *position* in them?"'²⁵ The relevance of this question is that it underscores the need for critical practices to establish a contestatory space in which the *form* of utterance or address speaks to otherwise unrecognised, or passively accepted, meanings, values and beliefs which cultural production normally reproduces and legitimises. In so far as contemporary critical practices operate within a society in which, as Victor Burgin observes, 'the market is "behind" nothing, it is *in* everything'²⁶, the notion of an outside of the commodity system becomes increasingly untenable. This would suggest that the definition or evaluation of a critical practice must be predicated on its ability to sustain critique from within the heart of the system it seeks to put in question.

If we are to grant that a range of postmodernist photographic work

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', Peter Demetz (ed), *Reflections*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, p 222.

²⁶ Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*, London, Macmillan, 1986, p 174.

²⁷ On Fred Lonidier's work and the London Docklands Project, see Diane Neumaier and Douglas Kahn (eds), *Cultures in Contention*, Seattle, The Real Comet Press, 1985. On Jenny Holzer, see Bruce Ferguson, 'Wordsmith: An Interview with Jenny Holzer', *Art in America*, December 1986, pp 108-115. On Mary Kelly see Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983. On 'Form Follows Finance', see Connie Hatch, 'Form Follows Finance', introduction by Jim Pomeroy, in *Camera Obscura*, vol 2 no 5, pp 26-34.

which emerged at the end of the 1970s did in fact initially function as a critical practice, it did so very much within these terms. First of all, unlike other contemporaneous critical practices which positioned themselves outside the art world and sought different audiences (for example, Fred Lonidier's 'Health and Safety Game', Jenny Holzer's 'Truisms', 'Inflammatory Essays' and 'Survival' series, the London Docklands project, Mary Kelly's 'Post-Partum Document' and D Art's 'Form Follows Finance', to mention only a few²⁷), postmodernist photography for the most part operated wholly within the parameters of high art institutions. As the photographic work of Sherrie Levine clearly demonstrates, the critical specificity of such practice is only operative, can only be mobilised, within a particular context. Its instrumentality, in other words, is a consequence of its engagement with dominant (aesthetic) discourses whose constituent terms (and hidden agendas) are then made visible as prerequisites for analysis and critique. As circumstances change (for example, with the assimilation of appropriation into the culture at large), so too does the position of the art work alter.

But within the overarching category of immanent critique it is important to distinguish between those practices that elucidate, engage with, or even contest their institutional frame, and those that suspend or defer their institutional critique in the belief that such critique is already implied within the terms of their focus on the politics of representation. Representation is, after all, itself contextually determined and the meanings thereby produced and disseminated are inseparable from the discursive structures which contain and enfold them. Consistent with the terms of Peter Burger's formulation, there is by now a lengthy history of art practices of the former type, ranging from those of the historical avant-garde through more recent production exemplified by Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, Louise Lawler and Christopher Williams. It is, I think, of some significance that the work of these artists has more or less successfully resisted the reduction to stylistics to which postmodernist photography so rapidly succumbed. This is in part due to the fact that, with the exception of Buren, these are all *protean* practices, whose changing forms are determined by the issues the work addresses, its venue, its occasion, the historical moment of its making. This formal flexibility not only militates against the fixity of a signature style, but emphasises the tactical and contingent aspect of critical practice which defines and redefines itself in response to particular circumstances. Working with contradictions entails not only a strategy of position as such, but a degree of manoeuvrability as well.

This in turn suggests that art practices predicated on the production of signature styles rather than constantly modified interventions may be especially vulnerable to neutralisation of their purported critique. The history of postmodernist photography overall would appear to confirm this analysis. As various theorists have argued, a position of resistance can never be established once and for all, but must be perpetually

refashioned and renewed to address adequately those shifting conditions and circumstances that are its ground.²⁸

It is one thing, however, for a critic to map out what she believes to be the necessary conditions for a critical practice, and quite another to deal with actively, assess, or articulate a position in relation to the work she actually confronts. Here, both critic and artist, situated within the restricted realm of high culture, are from the very outset enmeshed within a particularly dense matrix of contradiction. Once the decision is made to operate within the institutional space of art rather than outside it, critical writing and critical art are alike caught up in and subject to the very conditions such work attempts to contest. This is particularly the case with critical advocacy. Critical practice, if it is not to reduce itself to the tedium (and moralism) of the jeremiad, must be equally concerned with advocacy and partisanship. My own critique of the triviality and conservatism of official art photography was integrally related to my support of alternative photographic practices. This support in turn inevitably became part (a small part) of a cultural apparatus of undifferentiated promotion in the service of supply side aesthetics. Critical advocacy, irrespective of the terms in which it is couched, is either from the outset part and parcel of the commodity system (for example, in the format of the museum or gallery exhibition catalogue, or the commercial art magazine essay or review) or secondarily appropriated to it (as in the assimilation of critical writing into art journalism or the gallery press release). This means that critical writing, regardless of the writer's politics, can in no way consider itself as independent of the cultural apparatus it seeks to contest. This is not, however, to claim that there are no differences. Nor is this to suggest that critical writing is to be reduced to the opposite poles of partisanship or attack. On the contrary, ideally the work of the critic and the work of the artist – to the degree that they both conceive their practices critically – are theoretical, if not actual, collaborations. As is the case with the art practices with which such criticism collaborates, learns from, and shares its agenda, working with contradictions necessitates a practical sense of what those contradictions imply – what they enable and what they preclude.

Thus, while the prevailing conditions of cultural production are hardly cause for optimism, neither are they cause for unrelieved despair; it is, after all, the very existence of discernible contradictions that allows for the possibility of critical practices in the first place. That said, perhaps the most daunting of all the contradictions that critical practices must negotiate is the direct consequence of problematising the concept of the political in art. In this regard, the writing of Brecht, the practice of Heartfield, and the prescriptions of Benjamin can no longer be looked to as the *vade mecum* of critical practice. For if we accept the importance of specificity as a condition of critical practice we are thrown into the specifics of our *own* political conditions and circumstances in the sphere of culture. To the extent that these include a refusal of inside/outside dichotomies ('the market is *in* everything'), an interrogation of the

²⁸ For an excellent discussion of these issues see Victor Burgin, *op cit*.

notion of prescription itself (authoritative modes, practices, models), a recognition of the contingency and indeterminacy of meaning, and a general acknowledgement of the inescapable complicity of all practices within cultural production, it becomes increasingly difficult to say with any assurance what critical practices should actually or ideally seek to do. Needless to say, the putting in question of traditional conceptions of political correctness, of determinate and fixed positions of address, of exhortative or didactic modes of critique, has been exclusively the project of feminism and a part of the left. The regnant right knows no such uncertainty as it consolidates its position with increasing authoritarianism, repressiveness and certainty. To have thus problematised the conditions of political enunciation within cultural production at a moment of extreme political reaction is perhaps the most daunting contradiction of all.

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READING THE AUDIENCE

ANN GRAY ON NEW STUDIES OF
TELEVIEWING



The Price is Right: of the people, by the people or adapted for the people?

¹ Held at the University of London Institute of Education, July 10-12, 1986.

At the International Television Studies Conference held in London last July¹, Stuart Hall remarked that at previous similar conferences the audience research strand was the one to be avoided because of its predictable dullness of content. Hall was alluding, no doubt, to the predominance of quantitative, 'positivistic' audience research which held court in its number-crunching certainties and indeed still has the power to attract major funding, the 'hard' evidence which gives broadcasting organisations and advertisers alike their view of the audience and upon which they base programming and marketing decisions. More recent work on television audiences has not only challenged these assumptions, but seeks to discover what might constitute really useful knowledge about the audiences for television. The shift into the plural is significant here in moving away from an undifferentiated homogeneous mass whose only significance is that it is watching television at any particular

time to socially constituted audiences whose relationship with television involves the complex process of the production of meaning.

Alongside this re-conceptualisation of the audiences for television has been the development of work on popular culture, of which television is a significant element both as institution and text. Much of this work has addressed how popular genres might be analysed, the textual strategies employed and the ways in which they construct pleasure and desire for their audiences. With some notable exceptions², the emphasis has been on the text, rather than the institutional conditions of its production, in an attempt to establish how texts produce meaning and also as part of a more general project which demands that popular forms, such as television genres, should be given serious analytical attention.

Over the last twelve months, work which addresses television and its audience has proliferated at almost breathtaking speed, coming from different sources and perspectives and addressing different constituencies, with consequent ambiguities, harmonies and discords. It would seem timely to attempt to assess the contributions made to the understanding of the television audience and television as text, as they seem to raise urgent theoretical, methodological and political problems for current left cultural analysis, problems we cannot afford to ignore or allow to become unproductively divisive in the current socio-cultural climate in Britain.

One of the spectres dominating both television research and common-sense thinking about the medium has been that established by the 'effects' theorists and kept alive by the moral majority and the defenders of high culture alike. This suggests a mainly passive audience, sitting in front of the screen absorbing what is transmitted to them by broadcasters as directly as if through a hypodermic needle. It is this spectre which is attacked by two books, both of which would seem to be addressing a wider readership than that already informed by media analysis, and which, although they attempt the exorcism in rather different ways, seem to share certain assumptions about the television audience.

Laurie Taylor and Bob Mullan, funded by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), have produced the provocatively entitled *Uninvited Guests: The Intimate Secrets of Television and Radio*³, the hardback edition of which has images of Terry Wogan and Joan Collins on the cover. The book is based on group interviews carried out by The Research Business, 'a leading qualitative research company', with some 193 people in total and supplemented by material gathered by the BBC from some thirty other groups. The authors were also able to avail themselves of 'other studies' of TV audience conducted by the research department of the IBA. In addition, the 'Audience Reaction Service' of BARB conducted a national enquiry of a representative sample of 3000 viewers aged over twelve who were asked for their opinions on a number of statements about television. This already eclectic data source is supplemented throughout the book with viewers' letters to *The Sun*, Phillip Redmond, television companies and *The Radio Times*, some of which

² Manuel Alvarado and Ed Buscombe, *Hazell: The Making of a TV Series*, London, BFI/Latimer, 1978. John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado, *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text*, London, Macmillan, 1983. Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi (eds), *MTM 'Quality Television'*, London, BFI, 1984. Manuel Alvarado and John Stewart, *Made for Television: Euston Films Limited*, London, BFI, 1985. (See also Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*, London, Methuen, 1982 for her account of the production team involved in a popular soap opera.)

³ Laurie Taylor and Bob Mullan, *Uninvited Guests: The Intimate Secrets of Television and Radio*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1986.

are represented in facsimile. Press reports and articles are also included as is reference to a 'small survey' on the coverage of television by the popular press and the results of an interview with one 'television reporter'. The variety of material could well have generated several books, and it is the major weakness of this one that it presents a confusion of 'voices' from such different and disparate sources in an apparently arbitrary fashion. Although the results of the group interviews form the major source for quotes, other bits of 'evidence' seem to be given the same weight. The viewer sitting down and writing her or his response to a television programme, with the implicit distance and rationalisation involved, is very different from a viewer who responds within a group discussion, moderated by a professional researcher.

Although the study's 'discussion groups' contained nine or ten people who were recruited on the basis of their age, sex, class and particular interest in the topic, participants are only identified by gender (i.e., through first names) and age; in no other respects are they given any 'social' indices. In fact nowhere does the book give us a breakdown of the groups, which we are left trying to piece together in a jig-saw search to match up names. The result is that the authors impose their interpretation of the discussions, using their own ('witty') categories, without leaving any space for an alternative reading. This is, we could argue, a common enough strategy in research writing, but at the end the only response possible is 'don't people say some interesting things about television!' The final chapter reiterates the argument against ideas of a passive audience and the 'high' culture critics of popular forms, but this point could have been made with a rather more economic use of research data. Alternatively, the data could have been used in a way that would have extended our understanding of the relationship between viewers and the television screen.

There is, however, an obvious and urgent need to challenge the tenacity of those pervasive elitist attitudes to popular forms, and the image of the passive and 'zombie-like' viewer who simply swallows this 'junk' whole. *Open the Box*, a television series by Beat Productions recently transmitted on Channel 4, attempted to do this, as well as to examine the ways in which television addresses its audience. The series had a polemical intent – to demystify television's tacit claim to be a transparent 'window on the world' and to posit active and critical viewers, not duped by the television screen, but capable of interacting with it and thinking critically about programmes, and their own use of television.

Jane Root, a researcher on *Open the Box*, produced a book of the series⁴ and her preoccupations focus upon the 'zombie'/'junk' nexus. Drawing on recent research into television watching by Peter Collett, Roger Lamb⁵ and David Morley⁶ and celebrating popular television genres such as the soap opera and quiz shows, *Open the Box* sets out to dispel the myth of the passive audience. Root quotes Richard Dyer's essay 'Taking Popular Television Seriously', in which he suggests that we must ask

⁴ Jane Root, *Open the Box: About Television*, London, Comedia, 1986.

⁵ Peter Collett and Roger Lamb, *Watching People Watching Television*, Report to the Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1986.

⁶ David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, London, Comedia, 1986.

*why and how programmes are entertaining, why people like them and what children's main experiences of television are. These are serious questions because they take us to the heart of why most people watch television.*⁷

Serious questions, indeed, but ones which Root chooses to by-pass. Dyer and researchers like Ang⁸ and Hobson⁹, all of whom have begun to raise these questions, are collectively used only in order to shatter another 'myth', that of the disengaged, uninvolved, objective researcher, because they 'admit' to their enjoyment of popular genres. And here we have the major point of concern in this text, and one which re-activates a debate which has been aired through this journal and others. It is, put briefly, the problem of the popular.

The understanding of the popular in *Open the Box*, and implicitly in *Uninvited Guest*, seems to be that because millions watch particular television programmes, they are popular. John Caughie has examined this assumption:

*The polemical drive to establish popular television as 'serious' seems frequently to appear as a support for popular television because it is watched by millions of ordinary people.*¹⁰

He is critical of what he sees as a 'culturalist desire to respect what is "liked, beloved or admired by the people"' because it elides the historical shifts which have taken place in what might constitute "the popular".¹¹ Can we consider a popular television programme such as *The Price is Right* as 'belonging to the people', or 'constituted by the people'? Within commodity capitalism it is surely an example of a text which is 'adapted to the understanding or taste of ordinary people', in order to be consumed by the people. The word 'adapted' opens up a space which demands that we consider how these particular tastes and pleasures are constituted, both within the text and within the audience. We must, as Caughie argues, retain

*a very careful scepticism about the procedures which are brought to bear in constituting that popularity, and the adaptations which it involves.*¹²

The Price is Right, in common with all quizzes, has a studio audience. However, the audience here is remarkable because they behave more like a 'crowd', that is, as if they are at a sporting event, or 'spectacle', rather than a theatrical or 'cultural' event. They are noisy, they cheer, jump up and down and shout encouragement to the contestants. It is worth looking briefly at the way in which *Open the Box* discusses this aspect of the show.

*The Price is Right's key to producing natural performances is its elaborate physical environment. Bright lights, expensive, glittering backdrops, excited warm-up routines and loud music help to nurture a rowdy, uninhibited party atmosphere.*¹³

⁷ Richard Dyer, 'Taking Popular Television Seriously' in David Lusted and Phillip Drummond (eds), *TV and Schooling*, London, BFI, 1985.

⁸ Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, London, Methuen, 1985.

⁹ Dorothy Hobson, op cit.

¹⁰ John Caughie, 'Television Criticism', *Screen* July-October 1984, vol 25 nos 4-5, p 118.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Jane Root, op cit, pp 108-109.

We then hear from the producer, William Stewart, who says that

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p 109.

*The Price is Right is the only programme that doesn't inhibit people and make them behave like a 'TV audience'.*¹⁴

¹⁵ Jane Root, 'Come on Down!', *New Socialist* no 39, June 1986, p 27.

Leaving aside her apparently unproblematic use of the word 'natural', there is an obvious recognition on Root's part of the construction of this atmosphere, yet Stewart's quote is left unchallenged. In another article, Root warns against a 'suburban distaste for the gleeful vulgarity of many popular entertainments'.¹⁵ This warning is pertinent, and strikes against a left-middle class intellectual elitism which she sees as being displaced onto criticism on the grounds of exploitation of 'ordinary' people, and on a notion of the dubious politics of these popular forms. However, we must recognise that this 'gleeful vulgarity' is *not* spontaneous and natural, but the product of a complex amalgam of specific expectations, modes of address and environment, which position individuals in particular ways in relation to that event or experience, in much the same way as a middle-class audience attending the opening night of *La Traviata* at Covent Garden are interpellated in particular ways. Admittedly, the former *looks* spontaneous and natural, but there are no grounds for believing it to be so. If we understand this behaviour at the level of appearance, we fall into the dangerous trap of the consumerist notion of popular culture which naturalises the meanings produced by capitalism. How comfortably this slots into the professional ideology of 'giving the audience what it wants'.

¹⁶ Judith Williamson, 'The Problems of Being Popular', *New Socialist*, no 41, September 1986, p 14.

¹⁷ Carl Gardner, 'Populism, Relativism and Left Strategy', *Screen* January-February 1984, vol 25 no 1, pp 45-51. Nicholas Garnham, 'Public Service versus the Market', *Screen* January-February 1983, vol 24 no 1, pp 6-27. Ian Connell 'Commercial Broadcasting and the British Left', *Screen* November-December 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 70-80.

What seems to be happening here, and it is a worrying trend, is that by celebrating on the one hand an active audience for popular forms and on the other those popular forms which the audience 'enjoy', we appear to be throwing the whole enterprise of a cultural critique out of the window. The overwhelming impression left by Taylor, Mullen and Root is that popular television is popular because people like it; so, where's the problem? Television doesn't matter. The combination of a polemic against the dominant myths surrounding television, its audience and the subjectivity licensed by the postmodern ethos has resulted in the loss of some fifteen years' hard labour around the *production of meaning* and the ideological and political significance of the cultural. These things do matter. In a recent issue of *New Socialist*¹⁶, Judith Williamson argued for an analysis of popular texts and the pleasures which they afford which neither condemns nor emulates them. This concern was also voiced by Carl Gardner in his contribution to the debate within *Screen* on commercial broadcasting.¹⁷ The pertinent section of this debate for our purposes is the argument around the nature of commercial broadcasting put forward by Ian Connell against what he refers to as Nicholas Garnham's 'negative and pessimistic assessment of the potential of the various (new communications) systems' and his defence of 'public service' broadcasting. Connell argues that market forces impel commercial

broadcasters to be responsive to their publics. Theirs is not to show the way to cultural improvement as is the BBC, but

*It is perhaps better to say that the commercial companies have during the last 30 years or so led the way in making connections with and expressing popular structures of feeling.*¹⁸

The phrase *structures of feeling* reveals the culturalist roots of Connell's position. But where do these popular structures of feeling come from? Do they pre-exist commercial broadcasting companies? Are they lying there simply waiting to be tapped? Surely the dominant culture producing industries – advertising, cinema, the press, popular music, as well as television itself – have a hand in the production of these structures of feeling? That is not to say the audiences are being manipulated or duped, but that it is an essentialist fallacy to assume that this structure of feeling naturally emerges from the audiences for popular television. Rather than taking the 'structure of feeling' as a given, we require to know how these popular pleasures and tastes come about, what are the significant dimensions of the structures, what is being kept in place and what is being rendered invisible within the 'feelings'.

But Connell goes further in his attack on the 'cultural pessimists' when he suggests that 'effects' theorists and critical analysts of popular texts alike afford too great a power to television, arguing that the act of watching television, regardless of what is being watched, is a potentially subversive activity. Examining McQuail's notion of the 'disengaged' viewer, for whom watching television is 'out-of-role-time', Connell argues that television viewing is

*free from certain kinds of feelings of duty and obligation.*¹⁹

It is this absence of obligation which Connell suggests could lead to the undermining of certain 'norms of good behaviour', the debunking of symbols of authority, making television

*... not just diverting but, potentially at least, dangerous.*²⁰

Yet, at the very least, as Gardner²¹ points out, this is a gender specific argument. Men and women view television very differently and certainly, although the male viewer may have the luxury of being 'disengaged', the female viewer would very rarely be in this kind of position within the domestic environment.

Connell's argument that too much power is accorded to television is shared by the critical theorist Conrad Lodziak, who in his book *The Power of Television*²² examines the ways in which the notion of power has dominated television research from many different perspectives. Lodziak argues that critical media theory has overestimated the power and relevance of ideology in social reproduction at the expense of think-

¹⁸ Ian Connell, op cit, p 76.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p 78.

²⁰ *ibid*.

²¹ Carl Gardner, op cit.

²² Conrad Lodziak, *The Power of Television*, Frances Pinter, 1986.

²³ *ibid*, p 183.

²⁴ H Sahin and J P Robinson, 'Beyond the Realm of Necessity: Television and the Colonization of Leisure', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol 3, 1980.

²⁵ Conrad Lodziak, *op cit*, p 143.

²⁶ Ian Connell, *op cit*, p 79.

²⁷ This argument is analogous to debates around the possibility of a 'feminist methodology' and, although this cannot be pursued here, there may well be grounds for a potentially productive interaction.

ing about the material forces which determine use of leisure time. Television viewing is seen as a privatised leisure activity which occupies much of our 'free' time. Like Connell, he suggests that

*TV viewing offers a socially acceptable means of 'turning off' from direct social relations, a rest and a diversion from self-preoccupations.*²³

However, unlike Connell, Lodziak does not see this as a potentially subversive activity, nor as a pleasurable one. Following Sahin and Robinson²⁴, he regards television viewing as a sink down which free time is poured, leading to inertia and inactivity:

*In short, the reduction of the working day has not brought with it the rich development of cultural activities through which individuals might develop their potential.*²⁵

Television for Lodziak is manipulative, but of our time and 'freedom', not of our consciousness. In Lodziak's formulation, nothing seems to 'happen' between viewer and television screen, it simply preoccupies us, privatises us and limits our potential for becoming involved in more useful, social and political activities. Once again we are argued into a position where television itself doesn't matter.

Gardner takes up a further argument put forward by Connell about the nature of popular tastes and the practices of television watching. It is that, for the researcher/analyst, distance implies discrimination. Middle-class cultural theorists cannot analyse popular texts, because to do so is to be critical of them, but must simply attend to the ways in which 'ordinary' people watch television and the interpretations they make of the programmes they like to watch. Connell suggests that what we must do is

*suspend judgement in order to examine the means by which programmes or types of programmes are deemed watchable and, among other things, pleasurable.*²⁶

We must certainly suspend judgement, but we cannot abandon some kind of critical framework: to do so would be to fall into the kind of 'methodological naturalism' which enables us only to show things 'as they are'.²⁷ Distance, I would argue, is a necessary part of the process of the cultural critique if it is to go beyond a simple celebration of what is already there.

Prior to the mid-eighties, the key text in British television audience research was undoubtedly David Morley's *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, in which his object of analysis was

the specificity of communication and signifying practices, not as a wholly autonomous field, but in its complex articulations with questions of class,

*ideology and power. . . . This is to return to prominence . . . (questions) as to the structural conditions which generate different cultural and ideological competencies.*²⁸

Using this conception of a socially structured audience Morley and Charlotte Brunson had previously carried out a specific textual analysis of the early evening magazine programme, *Nationwide*²⁹, which established its ideological terrain and the dominant or preferred meanings generated. The text was shown to 29 already established groups whose members occupied different positions within the social structure, followed by interviews designed to reveal the extent to which the groups accepted, negotiated or opposed the preferred meaning in the decoding process. The project challenged both the predominant conceptions of the audience, reformulating this into an active, socially constituted one, and those theories which privileged the text as the site of meaning, leaving no space for the active reading subject.

The gaps and lacunae of the *Nationwide* study form the point of departure for Morley's latest project and for him they are: the 'contrived', non-domestic, setting of the viewing groups; the possibility of contradictory decodings which subjects may make across different types of texts and within different contexts; the specific genres preferred by particular sub-groups of the audience.

Readings, then, must be understood within the context of viewing and in the recognition that people occupy and assume different subject positions in their social relations. Individuals who constitute sub-groups of the television audience cannot be seen simply as bearers of the deep structures (class, for example) which can somehow be read off or matched up with their decoding strategies, but must be seen as subjects crossed by a number of different, and often contradictory, discourses. This is not to regard the subject as 'spoken' by those discourses, but, as Morley suggests, to

*see the person actively producing meanings from the restricted range of cultural resources which his or her structural position has allowed them access to.*³⁰

The cultural resources which are available to individuals and from which their particular cultural competencies are gained can be seen as major determining factors in the choices of popular genres which people make. Moreover, these 'resources' and 'competencies' are unevenly distributed within our society. Referring to the work of Bourdieu and others, Morley argues that the possession of cultural competence is

*determined outside the sphere of television – by family socialisation and education.*³¹

When Morley showed his groups the *Nationwide* programme, the ques-

²⁸ David Morley, *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, London, BFI, 1980, p 20.

²⁹ Charlotte Brunson and David Morley, *Everyday Television: Nationwide*, London, BFI, 1979.

³⁰ David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, London, Comedia, 1986, p 43.

³¹ *ibid*, p 44.

tion of whether those groups would *choose* to watch that programme in the first place was not considered. In order to understand what types of material are relevant and to whom

*we need to deal more directly with the relevance/irrelevance and comprehension/incomprehension dimensions of interpretations and decoding, rather than being directly concerned with the acceptance or rejection of particular substantive ideological themes or propositions.*³²

This involves a move away from considering the ideological problematic of specific televisual texts in relation to different viewing groups to what Morley calls 'audience availability'. Addressing this kind of audience competence and its distribution across the social structure opens up the interdiscursive space which encircles the viewing subject and her/his relation to both the deep social structures and to particular popular genres. Morley's revised methodology led to interviews with 'families' in their own homes in order to provide an 'ethnography of reading'. This attention to the 'politics of the living room' is a welcome and necessary stage in the development of television audience research. It seems almost unthinkable that, apart from Dorothy Hobson's earlier work on *Crossroads*, the actual context of television viewing has not been addressed. Yet it is hardly surprising perhaps when we consider the tremendous practical difficulties which research like this presents, and how unattractive it is to funding agencies. These restrictions are traceable throughout David Morley's book, and, indeed, voiced in his own critical afterword on the difficulties of pursuing 'effectively all the theoretical consequences of this model'³³.

One of the major problems is, in fact, that this study's sample of families is dominated by those with a working class or lower middle class background. Given that Morley wanted to explore the different ranges of cultural competencies and related choices, this is a severely limiting factor in the whole enterprise. I do not mean to argue that a wider range of family backgrounds would have produced a more 'representative' sample – this is not the aim of the ethnographic enterprise. However, it should have permitted the investigation of those differences of cultural competence. The consequence for Morley's study is that gender emerges as the strongest structuring element in viewing practice. My own research suggests that gender is, indeed, a major influence on viewing behaviour and most play a central role in any attempt to address the social constitution of the audience³⁴, but this should not exclude other factors which shape people's lives. Class and gender intersect in a variety of ways, and at the very least our necessarily small-scale projects should allow us to explore this complexity.

In his afterword to the *Nationwide* study Morley stated

the limitations of which I am most conscious and which I would see as the priority for further work in this area, lies at the level of methodology. Here

³² *ibid*, p 45.

³³ *ibid*, p 174.

³⁴ See Ann Gray, 'Behind Closed Doors: Women and Video Recorders in the Home', in *Boxed In: Women on Television*, London, RKP/Pandora, Autumn 1987.

*the question is one of developing methods of analysis which would allow us to go beyond the descriptive form in which the material is handled here.*³⁵

Six years on and we still have interview material produced in a largely descriptive form. Morley is certainly not unaware of this, and is not alone in wishing to develop further more sophisticated methods of analysis. *Family Television* emphasises the social use of television over consideration of textual strategies, and future methods should not ignore the relationship between popular genres and their audiences.

Of popular television genres it is arguably the soap opera which has received the most systematic attention from cultural analysts, in particular from a feminist perspective. However, such analyses have tended to assume an ideal (female) reader, inscribed within the feminine subject position offered by the text³⁶ and further emphasised by the assumed cultural competencies of the reader³⁷. The risk inherent in this enterprise is the conflation of the 'implied' and the 'real' reader. In *Speaking of Soap Operas* Robert Allen argues that, while we must aim for a 'reader-oriented poetics' in relation to textual analysis, we must not lose sight of that active 'real' reader consuming the soap opera within a social and cultural context. Although this book is preoccupied by his attack on the empiricist mass communication research model which dominates US studies of the soap opera, Allen pays due regard to this popular form as complex fictional work, as institutional commodity and uniquely as historical texts whose meaning(s) and reading(s) change through time. However, Allen stops short at addressing the 'real' reader, when he states:

*My concern has been to lay out the conditions under which meaning might be produced and the constraints – textual, institutional, and social – upon that reading. . . . The implicit challenge is to relate these constructed reader positions to the experiences of actual soap opera readers. It is a challenge I fully admit to not having taken up.*³⁸

Ien Ang has attempted to hold onto the duality of the reading relationship in her work on *Dallas*, primarily setting out to understand why it is so pleasurable. She executes an impressive and useful analysis of the textual strategies and mechanisms employed to generate pleasure, and examines the interaction with the text as it is conceived of by viewers. Ang's viewing data comes from letters sent in response to her advertisement in a women's magazine. However, using written accounts as empirical data necessarily distances and decontextualises respondents. To compensate for these difficulties, Ang attempts a 'symptomatic reading' of the letters.

We must search for what is behind the explicitly written, for the presuppositions and accepted attitudes concealed within them. In other words, the letters must be regarded as texts, as discourses people produce when they want

³⁵ David Morley, *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, op cit, p 163. .

³⁶ Ien Ang, op cit:

³⁷ *ibid*, p 11.

³⁸ Robert C Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, University of North Carolina Press, 1985, p 182.

³⁹ Ien Ang, p 11.

⁴⁰ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, University of North Carolina Press, 1984, p 13.

⁴¹ *ibid*, p 210, my emphasis.

*to express or have to account for their own preference for, or aversion to, a highly controversial piece of popular culture like Dallas.*³⁹

The problem remains, however, of a text and readers in isolation from their interaction *as a practice* which takes place within and as part of people's everyday lives. For a more sustained attempt at an investigation of the determining factors surrounding the appeal and use of popular fictional texts, we must look beyond studies of television audiences to Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, in which she provides a study of the entire social process by which one popular genre, the romance, is produced, distributed and consumed. Radway, like Morley, wants to account for the correspondences between a particular genre and specific cultural competencies of the readers. Her enterprise is in the ethnographic tradition, employing a series of questionnaires and interviews with a number of women who are regular readers of romantic fiction. She then seeks to

*represent schematically the geography of the genre as it is surveyed, articulated and described by the women themselves.*⁴⁰

But Radway does not leave it there. She goes on to analyse 'the depths' of these readings, of which the subjects are largely unconscious, acting as they do

*on cultural assumptions and corollaries not consciously available to them precisely because those givens constitute the very foundation of their social selves, the very possibility of their social action.*⁴¹

The social event of reading is the focus of this study, but Radway never loses sight of the specifics of the popular romance in this event and its particular significance for the female readers. Her study reveals important insight into the significance of the very act of reading (as a temporary refusal of domestic duties and demands) compared with the reading itself (as a compensation for unsatisfied needs and desires as well as a confirmation of the reader's position within patriarchal structures). Informed by a synthesis of approaches from literary theory, anthropology and psychoanalysis, her work reveals the complexity of its terrain. I would argue that, although the object of her study is popular romantic fiction, her methodological intervention is of tremendous importance to studies of the consumption of popular culture in general, and the further development of work on the audiences for television.

Morley and Radway's work has enabled Robert Allen to formulate the following questions which he suggests we need to raise in our attempts at the 'joining of textual and audience analysis':

What is the extent of the determination of meaning exercised by the text itself?

What forces condition the activations of texts within individual readers and among groups of readers?

⁴² Robert C Allen, op
cit, p 185.

What levels of the reading process are accessible and what methods are appropriate to that study?

What is the role of the investigator vis a vis both the texts he or she wishes to study and the readers who consume those texts?

*What is the epistemological status of articulated responses of readers in understanding the relationships between reader, text, and institution?*⁴²

If the current flowering of television audience research has done anything, it has established these questions as the bases of a project which is only just beginning.

MUSIC VIDEO IN THE (POST) MODERN WORLD

BY ANDREW GOODWIN

¹ E Ann Kaplan, 'A Post-Modern Play of the Signifier?' in Phillip Drummond and Richard Paterson (eds), *Television in Transition*, London, British Film Institute, 1985, pp 146-163. *Rocking Around the Clock: The Televisual Apparatus, Advertising and Schizophrenia in Music Television*, London, Methuen, 1987. Page references are included in parentheses in the text.

² MTV analysts, including Kaplan, persistently quote such figures without stopping to note that only a small proportion of these cable receivers actually tune in. Recent Nielsen ratings indicate that *less than 1%* are currently watching MTV – although the station disputes this figure, with some cause. But to state that 'by 1984 the audience had grown to 22 million' (p 2) is misleading.

Out on the road today/I saw a Dead Head sticker on a Cadillac/A little voice inside my head/Said don't look back, you can never look back . . .

Don Henley, 'The Boys Of Summer'

E ANN KAPLAN'S work on MTV is probably the best known analysis of music video undertaken in the six years since that service began broadcasting. She is the first author to have attempted the systematic application of cultural theory to this new and important form. In this book she develops – and in some places reproduces – work that students of film and TV will have seen in other journals, and which is perhaps most widely known through her paper to the 1984 International Television Studies Conference.¹ Kaplan restates the thesis outlined there, adds more illustrative material, details her theoretical starting-points in greater depth, and refines her categorisation of music video.

I will begin by engaging with Kaplan's commendable practice of stating the position which informs her approach. She comes to MTV as a US-based feminist, who grew up with the pop culture of the '60s, approaching the subject from her interest in psychoanalysis and film theory. It is my desire to use a Marxist cultural studies analysis to understand pop music (including its increasingly important relations with other mass media), as a British student of the media who 'grew up' in the '70s, while refusing to outgrow a passion for pop. These biographical points partly explain the profound differences between us. I will detail these later, after briefly summarising the book's central theses.

I.

Kaplan's desire to understand MTV is certainly very welcome. Music Television is the world's first 24-hour all-music cable TV service, now reaching a *potential* audience of some thirty million², in addition to

serving as the mould from which many imitations have been stamped. MTV has been one of the more successful basic cable TV services in the United States. And it differs from broadcast TV in a number of ways: the MTV schedule is not normally broken down into discrete programmes, but offers continuous 'flow', interspersing videos with advertising and presentation from 'VJs' (video jocks). MTV's programming is almost entirely advertising, since the videos themselves are promotional clips, normally financed by record companies (who hope to recoup these funds via additional record sales).

Kaplan's analysis is almost exclusively of music video on MTV, which is to say that she neither considers the wider circulation of music video, nor deals extensively with the institutional and textual issues raised by MTV beyond the presentation of the promotional videos themselves. Her argument can be broken down into four parts:

1. The old terms of aesthetic debate in cultural studies no longer apply in the postmodern world. The celebrated division between (popular) 'classic realist' texts and subversive avant-garde strategies no longer holds. Music video elides the distinctions between commerce and art, between popular and avant-garde techniques, between realism and modernism: 'The representation of a representation is no longer inherently subversive as in modernism' (p 44). Especially important here is the observation that the apparently anti-realist strategies of these videos can no longer be seen as part of a modernist aesthetic, since they do not undercut realist representation in order to expose ideology and illusionism, but simply leave the spectator in a state of unstable flux, a position without purchase. It is important to note that this point is derived not from a critique of the terms of that debate, but because new textual forms such as MTV are posed as beyond the scope of the old formulations.

2. Kaplan recasts feminist film theory and its approach to narrative by suggesting that new forms like MTV render its terms inadequate. The feminist critique of Hollywood does not apply to MTV, she argues, since the latter's gaze is often ungended, and does not correspond to the male 'look' of realist cinema.

3. These reformulations are then used to construct five categories for understanding music video. This model lays a reading of pop history across categories from psychoanalytic and film theory to arrive at five typical video forms: the Romantic, the Socially Conscious, the Nihilist, the Classical and the Postmodernist. However, traces of the postmodern are found in every category: the 'postmodernist' clip in this categorisation is one in which these elements are dominant.

4. The attempt to understand MTV as a postmodern phenomenon is a recurring theme in the book, encompassing both the general notion of the televisual apparatus as a postmodern technology and the more specific use of newer concepts, such as the notion of 'pastiche' developed by Fredric Jameson³. But unlike Jameson, Kaplan rejects pessimistic formulations of the postmodern in favour of an interpretation derived from

³ Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, no 146, July/August 1984.

⁴ *Journal Of Communication Inquiry*, vol 10 no 1, Winter 1986.

⁵ See Alan Durant, *Conditions Of Music*, London, Macmillan, 1984.

Derrida and French post-structuralism, celebrating the refusal to occupy a fixed space and finding progressive potential in a constant free-play of representation – which is identified as a recurring element in music video. She concludes that despite MTV's typical rejection of any position from which to enunciate a social or political critique, it remains a potentially radical form.

I will discuss Kaplan's book in the context of the growing postmodernist literature on the subject. Many of my criticisms of this approach are by no means peculiar to Kaplan, who is at pains to note her own distance from some of its more extreme formulations. Nonetheless, her book will be central in hardening the now routine linkage of music video and post-modernism: it is the culmination of an argument that has hitherto appeared only in journal articles and special issues, such as the recent music video edition of the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*⁴. My critique of this approach will first consider its analysis of music and the music industry, then look in detail at the arguments about postmodernism and its politics.

II.

Postmodern analyses of music video generally have very little to say about pop music itself, or the music industry. This is very serious, because MTV and music videos are consumed as a part of a pop culture that lacks any one dominant discourse, in which the different sites of meaning production (records, cassettes, posters, gigs, films, newspaper articles, music video, etc) are interdependent⁵. Since this lacuna forms the basis of many of my arguments I will begin by outlining the problems it creates.

Ann Kaplan's book has plenty of impressionistic comments on music video soundtracks – but this rarely connects with its interest in visual texts and leads to problems at both the level of consumption and production. Significantly, while the analysis of subjectivity in the process of reception is extremely sophisticated in some respects, the analysis of the production context is entirely descriptive, often slipping into pre-structuralist (indeed, pre-Marxist) thinking that sits oddly next to the rest of the book. It resorts to neo-conspiratorial notions of institutional control: for instance, the presence of oppositional political space on MTV is attributed to the failure of 'management' to maintain 'control' of its schedule. And a latent auteurism surfaces from time to time:

Rock videos may be seen as revitalising . . . dead images by juxtaposing and re-working them in new combinations that avoid the old polarities. This may be the only strategy available to young artists struggling to find their place in society and to create new images to represent the new situation they find themselves in. (p 46)

Yet the lack of cultural autonomy in music video production – noted in Dave Laing's *Screen* account of the economic aspects of the form⁶ – is absolutely key here; while there clearly is an auteurist and/or film school input into music video, the promo directors are still locked into a servicing role with the record companies that makes such formulations pertinent to only a very small minority of texts. The question of oppositional spaces needs to be put to the music industry and the institution of MTV; but where this is attempted, Kaplan seems to be working with folkist conceptions which pose MTV's commercialisation of pop as the central problem, rather than its mediation between an already commercialised form and its audiences:

If one looks only at MTV one might conclude that rock is dead, or that it has come to the end of its line. In fact, innovative and important music is being developed outside of this 'mainstream', but it is only heard or seen by those aficionados who make efforts to follow developments. (p 53)

Another area that needs further development is our understanding of how music video is consumed and to what extent its meanings are tied into a wider world of popular music. A crucial question here concerns the nature of pop music narratives, and the difficult problem of how to identify the most productive levels of study. Kaplan's concern is typical of most analysis of music video to date, in that she concentrates on the visual narratives of individual videos. However, the images of pop star faces (which, as Kaplan correctly notes, is the one constant in nearly all the videos) trigger meanings that are partially established beyond MTV. It is therefore of questionable value to discuss these star images as if the musicians were simply actors whose 'characters' can be understood via some form of realist/fictional aesthetic. It has become commonplace to identify three kinds of music video (which will often overlap in any one text): performance clips, narratives and anti-narratives⁷. While this is a useful beginning, analysts have yet to consider the status of music video fictions, the meaning of pop stars acting out dramatic roles within them, and the degree to which promo tapes might need to be understood not as fictions, but as neo-factual discourses that have more in common with, say, TV coverage of sport than cinematic fictions or TV drama. My point is that music videos can be read as documentaries *about* stars, either as 'real people', or the pop *personae* they adopt. There are thus *macro-narratives* above and beyond the individual fictions of each video⁸.

Music video analysis is still in its very earliest stages of development and is, in my view, reproducing a problem encountered in the formative years of pop music studies. The predominant form of 'reading' videos in isolation both from each other and from the other discourses of pop is reminiscent of the early analyses of pop that attempted to elucidate its meaning via a reading of song lyrics – the problem wasn't that the lyrics were unimportant, but that they were only part of the story. Similarly,

⁶ Dave Laing, 'Music Video: Industrial Product and Cultural Form', *Screen* March-April 1985, Vol 26 no 2, pp 78-83.

⁷ Joan D Lynch, 'Music Videos: From Performance to Dada-Surrealism', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol 18 no 1, Summer 1984; Marsha Kinder, 'Music Video and the Spectator: Television, Ideology and Dream', *Film Quarterly*, vol XXXVIII no 1, Fall 1984.

⁸ Kobena Mercer convincingly relates star-image and videotext in 'Monster Metaphors: Notes On Michael Jackson's "Thriller"', *Screen* January-February 1986, vol 27 no 1, pp 26-43.

⁹ On Madonna, see Judith Williamson, 'The Making Of A Material Girl', *New Socialist* no 31, October 1985; Rosemary Kowalski, 'Madonna: Woman Is The Message', *ONE TWO THREE FOUR: A Rock and Roll Quarterly*, no 3, Autumn 1986; Dave Marsh, 'Girls Can't Do What The Guys Do: Madonna's Physical Attraction', in Dave Marsh (ed), *The First Rock and Roll Confidential Report*, New York, Pantheon, 1985.

most music video analysts engage in detailed analysis of individual visual narratives, while neglecting the macro-narratives of star *personae* and the meaning of the music itself (including, more often than not, the lyrics!). But while analysis of music video is surely valid and important, it needs to be located within an understanding of pop's (dispersed) industry and the meanings it generates.

For example: Kaplan's reading of the video of Madonna's hit 'Material Girl' is an extremely impressive unravelling of a narrative that is almost frightening in its complexity. Naturally it does include reference to other cultural texts – since the clip is partly a pastiche of a scene from the movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Kaplan brings considerable skill to this task, and is able to show how a reading of the video might be informed by an understanding of the movie. What isn't referenced is the debate in pop culture about the meaning of Madonna, and in particular the absolutely crucial question of the different reaction evoked among boys, girls, women and men⁹. The important popular movie *Desperately Seeking Susan* isn't discussed as a factor in developing (and perhaps shifting) the meaning of Madonna – a process that continued with 'Papa Don't Preach'. Having correctly acknowledged that one cannot discuss 'Material Girl' without looking at *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, why not also acknowledge that other Madonna texts (songs, photographs, interviews, Live Aid, etc) must also be incorporated into any understanding of her videos? This is especially important in looking at MTV, because – as Kaplan observes – its conditions of reception are often casual and fleeting. Like many other advertising discourses, they often assume that the meanings cashed-in have already been established elsewhere.

And why pick the text – a thirty four year old film – that MTV viewers and Madonna fans are likely to be least familiar with? The references to the movie are fascinating for those of us interested in film, but the analysis has little to tell us about the meaning of 'Material Girl' for Madonna fans and MTV-watchers – many of whom have probably never seen *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and thus may have no idea that the clip is a pastiche. The 'Material Girl' analysis is symptomatic of the postmodern approach in many ways: it's clever and extremely interesting for people who read *Screen*, but needs to be grounded more firmly in a consideration of the actual processes of meaning-production undertaken by MTV audiences.

Kaplan's approach to the MTV audience is derived almost entirely from theories of film, television and psychoanalysis, in a manner that is fairly typical of recent writing about music video. There is clearly a great deal that we can bring from this work into the context of pop. But it also generates statements like this:

Like the infant . . . the MTV spectator is the silent/gazer in a one-way process, relying on the close-ups of the performer's face and on the tone/pitch/rhythm of the music for stimulation. Unlike the baby, the MTV spectator can decode the verbal information of the lyric, but in practice rarely has time

to do so, taken up as she/he is by the movement of the visuals and the flow of the music. What we have is a structure of interaction with the images not unlike that of the baby vis-a-vis the mother's face. (p 91)

Aside from overlooking the fact that most MTV audiences will also hear its music and lyrics repeatedly on the radio, on record and cassette, and via live performance (thus bringing much more information to the videos than is acknowledged here), this kind of formulation also casts consumers as undifferentiated objects of psycho-social discourse and thus seems to contradict Kaplan's avowed aim of acknowledging recent research that stresses the importance of looking at a range of socially-differentiated interpretations. The absence of any discussion of the range of readings in MTV texts seems to stem from a belief that the reading formation brought to MTV by its audience precisely 'fits' its textual strategies – an extremely contentious assumption that produces a series of readings that apply theory to texts in a manner that tends to undercut the attempt to break with earlier methodologies.

The neglect of music is perhaps more understandable, given Kaplan's background in film studies, and the difficulties we all face in writing about it. But Kaplan only amplifies this problem by rejecting or undervaluing pop criticism and the work of pop historians. She also risks alienating readers who have a deep interest in pop by paying so little attention to its specifics. In the typescript and galleys I read the references to pop (and music video) were marked by a very high volume of error, from consistently and persistently misspelt pop names, through numerous confusions: Kaplan mistakes Simple Minds' black female backing singer for Aretha Franklin, gets Dave Stewart's name wrong in her discussion of 'Sisters Are Doin' It For Themselves', makes dozens of small errors that clearly aren't typos.

The lack of attention to music creates three problems for the textual analyses, in my view. First, I believe it leads to an overemphasis on the degree to which music video breaks with realist narratives. It is noted (p 47) that musical rhythms and timbre (along with star images) hold together otherwise incoherent visual texts, but this is forgotten in the textual analyses. I don't want to underestimate the difficulties of applying terms like realism and narrative to music, but it isn't hard to see how, even in a quite superficial way, music video soundtracks offer both harmonic and structural narrative resolutions that may offset the apparently destabilising nature of the visual images. It is also clear that the visuals often remain subordinate to the rhythm of the music, thus reversing the conventional cinematic relations between visual narrative and 'illustrative' soundtrack. We need more work on this aspect of music video, since most of the research published so far is curiously silent about its music.

Second, I believe that the search for postmodernity often leads to a misrecognition of visual elements in music video that belong properly in debates relating to pop music, not postmodernism. Thus Kaplan mistakes the representation of mood, emotion and the private sphere of feel-

¹⁰ See Simon Frith, 'Mood Music', *Screen* May-June 1984, vol 25 no 3, pp 78-87.

ings for incoherence, schizophrenia and the absence of any investment in the symbolic realm. Like pop itself, music video evokes and makes public an unvisualised world of private feelings¹⁰. Unlike visual images, music rarely connotes literally. Music videos are not only a part of the world of television or film, they are also a part of the music industry, and while this is increasingly integrated into the other media at the institutional level, music itself continues to have considerable textual autonomy from other forms. Narrative videos that attempt to make literal illustrations of a song's connotations nearly always look absurd, either because they miss the metaphor (for instance, in the BBC's notorious use of archive shots of shipbuilding to illustrate Elvis Costello's song of that name), or because they try to show it and thus make the oblique textual strategies of pop too direct. Music videos that seem to throw out random unrelated images are often attempting to mimic the techniques of pop – to represent structures of feeling not easily reducible to words. The weakness of this attempt to equate non-realist visual imagery with textual destabilisation is that it reproduces as an analysis of music video a notion that has often been used as an excuse to avoid rational engagement with music itself: like the pop analysts who see music as non-representational and therefore more or less impervious to verbal description, postmodernists sometimes seem to be arguing that music video is not just beyond realism, but somehow outside the world of representation altogether.

A third area of difficulty is specific to Kaplan's work and concerns her attempt to establish the five categories of music video. I find this categorisation confusing and ultimately not very useful. In part this is because it is based on shifting theoretical/historical sands: the first three categories are rooted in pop history (romantic clips deriving from 1960's soft rock, socially conscious from 1970's rock and nihilist from 1980's new wave and heavy metal music); but the classical category is understood in terms of film theory (it's a reference to classic realist texts, not Beethoven), while the postmodern clips are simply those in which such motifs are more plentiful. The result is confusing, because of course clips from one category might easily be placed in another – romantic clips can be classically realist, nihilist videos might be postmodern, and so on.

It's also not very useful, because key mechanisms in the music industry (such as genre and authorship) become extremely difficult to explain when laid across this scheme. Thus the Peter Gabriel clips 'Shock The Monkey' (classical) and 'Sledgehammer' (socially conscious) are in different categories – and yet they arguably have much more in common with each other (partly because their meaning is dependent on Gabriel's presence) than with other examples in their category. (And what exactly are the extended sexual metaphors of 'Sledgehammer' socially conscious of?) The scheme is also much too crude, in musicological terms, in its efforts to condense the music of each decade into one category, without any concern for the more important distinguishing feature – musical genre and their meanings (which cut across these historical divisions).

III.

This book is the fullest discussion so far of the concept of postmodernism in relation to music video. Kaplan identifies postmodern elements working at three different levels: the televisual apparatus of MTV itself; the presence of postmodern aspects throughout music video *per se*; and the notion of a postmodern 'world view'. Her discussion of MTV as televisual apparatus with its own specificities is a useful attempt to improve on generalised discussions of music video that don't examine its conditions of exhibition and reception. She draws heavily on Baudrillard in these passages, identifying MTV as a postmodern format that typifies a technology (TV) which is itself profoundly postmodern. This argument can be condensed into two important and useful points: first, MTV is typical of television's impulse to sell, its cultivation of desire and the effort to attach this drive to commodities (via advertising); secondly, television has flattened out the past, reducing a sense of history to an ever-present experience of the moment. Thus MTV's rampant commercialism and its use of images from pop's past are incorporated into the case for its postmodernity.

These are important arguments, although I'm not convinced they are very new, or intrinsically postmodern. And I'm especially struck not only by the often noted parallels between aspects of these theses and the work of the Frankfurt School, but also by its congruence with the arguments of contemporary political economists of the media, whose line of inquiry is usually thought to be located in an entirely unrelated paradigm. I am generally in agreement with Kaplan's arguments on these matters, and merely want to suggest some additions and qualifications to her analysis.

MTV's apparent refusal to acknowledge history needs to be related to the pop culture it serves more rigorously than it is in most postmodern analysis of the form. For instance, Kaplan states that:

MTV blurs previous distinctions between past, present and future. . . . MTV, as a text, arguably makes a postmodernist use of historical discourses about rock and roll as constructed by rock critics. . . . The stance of the texts is that there is one time continuum in which all exists: past, present and future do not indicate major time barriers, but rather a time band upon which one can call at will. (p 129)

This is an interesting observation. But a lack of attention to pop leads her to fumble this moment of insight:

What is interesting here is the way in which this timeless present often has a futurist, post-holocaust look. . . . Most often the rock video world looks like no place, or like a post-nuclear holocaust place - without boundaries, definition or recognizable location. Figures are often placed in a smoky, hazy

¹¹ See Lawrence Grossberg, 'The Politics of Youth Culture: Some Observations on Rock and Roll in American Culture', *Social Text*, no 8, 1983/84; 'Is There Rock After Punk?', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol 2 no 3, 1986.

environment. . . . the sudden, unexplained explosion is a common feature. (p 130)

Or is this 'noplacement' a rock performance? Read that passage again without the postmodern gloss and it is clear that it might easily reference the iconography of a live pop performance, which is often present in video clips, including those not based on a representation of 'live' performance. The lack of boundaries, the smoke and explosions and the hazy back-lighting (which Kaplan associates with German expressionist film style) are all present in live pop performance. Images of exterminism are certainly prevalent in pop, but reading music video exclusively through the rhetoric of postmodernism in this case leads to a neglect of the more pervasive discourses of live performance.

What is missing in the discussion of history in postmodern pop is the extremely significant break-up of any dominant contemporary musical form¹¹, and the trend towards raiding older, sometimes pre-modern, musical forms and visual styles (MTV's re-screening of *The Monkees* is an important example). This has always been a feature of pop, but has now become so pervasive that it appears to have no 'present'; because, paradoxically, everything is contemporary.

The thesis about MTV's blurring of historical distinctions is also too one-dimensional. While it is broadly true, it is weakened by the presence on the station of the 'Closet Classics' slot which explicitly frames archival clips as historical material. More recently (since this book was written, as far as I know) MTV has begun to consolidate these clips into a daily show, trailed by the VJs using out-of-date pop slang ('it's a groovy hip trip') that can only be read as good old-fashioned parody. The VJ's voice-over almost seems designed to foil the postmodern thesis, as it promises a 'vintage boneyard of fab fossils' – you don't get much more historical than that. This development is unfortunate for a central thesis in this book, and indicates the vulnerability of the generalisations of post-modern theory.

Although Ann Kaplan seeks to locate music video inside a non-cinematic analysis of TV flow, her self-denying ordinance of looking only at music video on MTV does set limits on this project. It means that other extremely important areas of MTV go undiscussed – and the role of the VJs is the critical issue here, it seems to me, if we are looking at MTV as a new kind of television. Although their role has diminished since the station's earliest days, these MTV presenters play an anchoring role in establishing the tone of the station, and in providing a direct mode of address that constantly endorses not just the sales pitch of the service, but also its implied (liberal-humanist) position on events such as Farm Aid, Artists Against Apartheid, and its (less progressive) support for moral crusades such as Rock Against Drugs. Given the attention that television studies has paid to the role of presenters and TV 'personalities' it is especially curious that this aspect of the MTV 'frame' is neglected.

MTV's presentation of the videos is also important in that, like broad-

cast TV, it will often chop off the beginnings and/or endings, thus obliterating key narrative premises and resolutions. This phenomenon, which is widespread in music video distribution, contributes to the sense of destabilisation in viewing the videos – a phenomenon that is constantly referred to, without considering its roots in the wider ‘flow’ of MTV. Thus, the postmodern analysis of music video might usefully borrow more than it does here from conventional approaches to television studies.

The second level of postmodern analysis is the identification of aesthetic trends in music video generally. A great deal of the textual analysis is concerned to establish that the video clips need to be understood outside the old terms of the realism/modernism debate. I agree with this project – it is welcome, long overdue and especially pertinent to music video, which is based on a form (pop performance) that has so little in common with the cinematic texts that have tended to dominate the debate about cultural form. Once again, I will concentrate on the areas where I wish to qualify or add to the efforts of Kaplan (and others) to find postmodern elements in music video texts.

The first of these elements is the convergence of avant-garde/modernist and popular/commercial/realist texts in music video in general and MTV in particular¹². Kaplan is clearly correct in her view that the old terms of debate need to be re-thought in order to understand MTV. But she is referring here to debates in film studies, not pop music, and so misses the more interesting parallels between postmodernism and contemporary pop.

Categories like ‘the classic realist text’ make little sense when applied to music video as a formal argument derived from film studies, for a whole host of reasons: a) pop narratives operate quite differently from those of literature or film; b) the ‘characters’ of pop and music video ‘fictions’ have a rather different status from those forms in which narrative is the primary discourse; c) the terms of the realism debate can’t really apply to a form that was never based on ‘illusionism’ – music video is often a substitute for pop performance, which has always broken down the ‘fourth wall’ and ‘revealed the machinery’; d) the pop avant-garde existed well before MTV (for instance, in the 1960s music and imagery of Captain Beefheart, Frank Zappa, The Beatles, etc, and in late-1970s punk rock) – partly because pop production has often existed in symbiosis with art schools¹³.

I don’t dispute that one can talk about realist and non-realist discourses in pop, although there is no consensus about how to do this as yet. The problem is that ‘realism’ in film and music are two quite different concepts, and that MTV is a part of the culture of music, not cinema. Consequently, to observe that MTV requires us to re-work theories of film misrecognises its role in the pop fusion of commercial and avant-garde strategies. The really interesting question here concerns the collapse of distinctions between ‘rock’ (‘artistic’, supposedly non-commercial) and ‘pop’ (commercial, ‘incorrect’) that has followed punk. The important

¹² I am aware of the dangers of conflating the terms on either side of this dichotomy, especially in the case of the complex relation between modernism and the avant-garde. However, since Kaplan tends to equate the two, I won’t pursue the important observations made on this matter by Andreas Huyssen, ‘The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s’, *New German Critique* no 22, Winter 1981.

¹³ See Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art Into Pop*, London, Methuen, forthcoming.

¹⁴ This question is opened up in Andrew Goodwin, 'From Anarchy To Chromakey: Music, Video, Media', *ONE TWO THREE FOUR: A Rock and Roll Quarterly*, no 5, Spring 1987.

¹⁵ Ernst Bloch *et al*, *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, New Left Books, 1977.

and deeply relevant development goes undiscussed, however, except for a brief passage on the redundant issue of the 'incorporation' of counter-cultural rock into the pop mainstream¹⁴.

This touches on a second issue – the extent to which music videos refuse the viewer a stable position from which to articulate either a coherent reading of the text, or a political stance. Central to this position is the view that while the music video test is not classically realist, neither is it modernist. Music videos pull the rug out from under the viewer not with the aim of critiquing social reality (or representation), but simply in order to leave her/him floundering about, unable to stand on a firm, fixed spot. This strategy is seen as typical of the postmodern aesthetic.

Anyone who has watched MTV will be familiar with this phenomenon; and while this analysis is exclusive to that service, it is a response that can also be applied to a broader range of music video sites and TV rock shows. The sense of destabilisation induced by some clips is almost a literal, physical, one, as we are not so much 'sutured' into the text as torn from it bodily. My reservations about Kaplan's otherwise useful comments on this phenomenon concern its theoretical and methodological premises. There is a danger of overlooking the enormous number of video clips that *do* provide a position for the viewer and which *do* offer realist narrative resolution. (The presence of the latter in other aspects of MTV flow, such as the various chart 'countdown' slots, is also missed, as is the stabilising role of the aptly-named TV 'anchor' – in this case, the VJs.) Kaplan's methodology is open to the charge that it over-estimates the degree of destabilisation and incoherence in MTV, by neglecting five elements – i) realist visual narratives; ii) musical narrative resolutions; iii) the TV 'anchor' – the VJs; iv) the anchoring function of lip-synching pop star faces; v) narratives of pop stardom, in which the videos act as 'documentaries' detailing a long-term narrative of artistic/celebrity development. A number of these points *are* made in the course of the book, but they are undervalued – due, in my view, to a concern to establish postmodernism as the dominant framework for understanding MTV.

And do we really need new theories to explain the incorporation of modernist techniques? The Lukacsian critique of modernism does after all make many of the points belatedly adopted by the postmodernists. I don't know if anyone is prepared these days to concede that Lukacs got *anything* right at all, but it is notable, surely, that Fredric Jameson's earlier contribution to the debate about art, modernism and advertising occurs in that context, in the concluding essay of *Aesthetics And Politics*¹⁵. While the Lukacsian assault on modernism is surely flawed, that doesn't justify the current fashion for re-releasing his better moments on the postmodern label without any acknowledgement – Lukacs and the Frankfurters are fast becoming the old bluesmen of cultural studies, ripped off by theorists left, right and centre, their best riffs recycled as the 'new' sound of postmodernism.

The third element in the postmodern/music video coupling is the extremely fruitful discussion surrounding the concept of 'pastiche', which Jameson identifies, in a famous comment, as 'blank parody'. Again, this is a concept that resonates strongly in modern pop, since its increasingly frequent raids upon the past have taken place in a culture that also increasingly eschews parody or kitsch. But while the development of this idea is a valuable addition to critical analysis, it remains a fairly blunt instrument.

Perhaps Terry Eagleton's efforts to engage with pastiche in a more sophisticated manner could be developed and extended¹⁶. It is clear, for instance, that while many of MTV's continuity sequences do fit the postmodern framework, many do not, because they clearly parody broadcast/network TV and announce MTV's intention to speak from a counter-cultural position ('Better Sorry Than Safe' runs a recent trailer). Similarly, the presence of high-cultural discourses (while often incorporated into a popular genre) is often ironic – what else is the hugely popular Falco video 'Rock Me Amadeus'? But where Eagleton looks for the parody hidden in the pastiche, I would ask that music video critics also examine the extent to which the phenomenon is one of *celebration*. Much music video 'pastiche' is actually a celebration of popular culture that has nothing at all to do with parody – an example is the homage to the '60s TV series *The Avengers* in The Pretenders clip for 'Don't Get Me Wrong'.

Merely to invoke 'pastiche' doesn't begin to grasp the complex ways in which MTV incorporates other texts. Strangely, Kaplan's interest in cinema doesn't prompt any discussion of the important mechanism of using movie clips in videos to promote Hollywood films. Instead, almost every example of 'quoting' from other texts is gathered up into the category of pastiche, in order to bolster the argument for postmodernism. But it is possible to identify numerous distinct ways in which other texts are incorporated into music video, which might be seen as running across a continuum: through social critique (for instance TV news in the 'Sun City' anti-apartheid clip), parody (including self-reflexive parodies of music video, like Phil Collins' 'Don't Lose My Number'), pastiche (Sigue Sigue Sputnik's video references to *Blade Runner*, etc, Ozzy Osbourne's use of *Dallas* in 'The Ultimate Sin'), promotion (movie trailers such as Duran Duran's 'A View To A Kill', David Bowie's 'Absolute Beginners') and homage (Big Audio Dynamite's tribute to Nicholas Roeg in 'e = mc²', Propaganda's German expressionist 'Dr Mabuse', and the celebration of '60s TV soul in the Diana Ross clip 'Chain Reaction').

Finally, there is the question of postmodernism as a 'world view' expressed in music video texts. Here I think postmodern analysts might usefully remember that in the seminal article by Jameson which everyone cites there is a concerted effort to relate the postmodern aesthetic to the social relations of capitalism. Here there is a space for an analysis of postmodernism as a social condition that doesn't necessarily implicate

¹⁶ Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Post-Modernism', *New Left Review* no 152, July/August 1985.

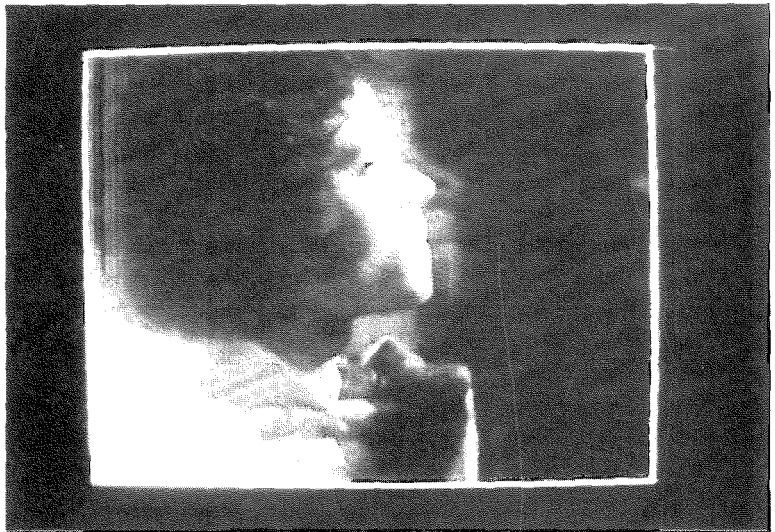
¹⁷ For an attempt to locate the emergence of postmodernism as a sociological phenomenon, see Fred Pfeil, 'Makin' Flippy-Floppy: Postmodernism and the Baby-Boom PMC', in Mike Davis *et al*, *The Year Left*, London, Verso, 1985, and 'Postmodernism and Our Discontent', *Socialist Review*, no 87/88, 1986.

¹⁸ See Will Straw, 'The Contexts of Music Video: Popular Music and Postmodernism in the 1980s', Working Papers in Communication, McGill University, 1986.

the use of postmodern theories that some of us find a shade idealist. I would like to follow Fred Pfeil in suggesting that these shifts towards a postmodern culture can be explained in sociological and demographic terms¹⁷, as the break-up of counter-cultural formations, which leave today's youth and their adult counter-cultural defectors in a position that academic commentators find difficult to explain, precisely because they are locked into counter-cultural assumptions that no longer apply.

Some of the notions of a postmodern world view might also be traced back to the music industry itself¹⁸. Particularly interesting here is the issue of music video's self-consciousness and its peculiar use of irony, which partly stems – I would speculate – from the fact that it is selling to a generation of extremely sophisticated consumers, for whom a straight sales pitch is merely laughable. The shift is thus towards advertising that sends itself up, comically commenting on its own devices – a mechanism that can be seen elsewhere in pop (the promotion of British bands Frankie Goes To Hollywood and Sigue Sigue Sputnik) and television (Max Headroom, and the recent US TV ads for Isuzu cars). Irony, in the postmodern world, is thus reduced to a form of promotional flattery.

Crossover video:
Michael Jackson in
'Billie Jean'.



The presence of promotional strategies goes curiously unnoticed in postmodern textual analysis, as if industry and texts were quite unrelated. But, as Frith and Horne point out, music video is partly about constructing viewers as consumers¹⁹. In order to generate the extra record sales needed to finance the videos, record companies exert a considerable degree of control over the imagery used in the clips. The videos of Prince, Madonna and Sigue Sigue Sputnik are partly about establishing new acts as stars. The recent videos for The Moody Blues,

¹⁹ Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *op cit*.

Genesis and Yes are about finding and keeping a young audience for ageing rock musicians. Many heavy metal videos emphasise performance because they must establish the authentic musical competence of the musicians. The videos for Run DMC, Janet Jackson and Michael Jackson are designed to promote 'crossover' and construct a white audience for black rock music. Of course, the meaning of these videos isn't therefore reducible in a determinist manner to these economic factors. (Although the attempt to do so would be no more reductive than the effort to reduce them to Oedipal drives.) But they do have great significance. In terms of material effects, they often do generate additional record sales and therefore appear to construct their 'subjects' as consumers rather successfully. That certainly isn't all there is to say about the matter, but it is important; and it isn't addressed by isolating the comments on institutions from the textual analysis.

IV.

Kaplan's book concludes with a rejection of postmodern pessimism:

One could see the effacing in MTV of old boundaries . . . as an exhilarating move towards a heteroglossia that calls into question moribund pieties of a now archaic humanism. . . . The creativity and energy of rock videos could represent a refusal to be co-opted into the liberalism that has brought America to its present crisis. . . . Far from the incoherent flow of images signalling a schizophrenic failure of language, the young adult's refusal to enter the realm of the symbolic could represent a healthy breaking of the confining boundaries and dichotomies that were constructed originally to serve certain bourgeois ends. . . . (pp 132-3)

It is refreshing to read an account of MTV that refuses to see music video as yet another example of 'incorporation', but there are nonetheless two central problems with this conclusion. First, it is not really argued so much as asserted (however tentatively), and in a manner that hardly causes the optimistic will to burst forth. 'MTV's construction of a decentered spectator indicates recognition of the alienated world teenagers confront' (p 46). Maybe so. But why should MTV's 'recognition' of this sad state of affairs cause us to reject Jameson's pessimism? Kaplan never really demonstrates her reasoning here, and her tone suggests that even she is doubtful about it. Furthermore, the politics of this argument oscillate between postmodern theory and old-fashioned moralism so much that I'm suspicious about the former's ability to tackle political issues. Thus Kaplan rightly bemoans sexist imagery and welcomes the growth of benefit-oriented pop in terms that are quite indistinct from those of a boring old humanistic epistemological realist.

Cultural studies debates about pessimism and optimism have become

rather superficial recently; no one wants to be thought pessimistic, and describing someone's work thus has become tantamount to stating that it's wrong. Spend a day watching MTV and you will discover just how much there is to be pessimistic about. Nonetheless, I'm not going to take the so-called cultural pessimist line. Instead I want to suggest that Kaplan's argument is the wrong way up, a veritable *camera obscura*. The celebration of the Bad New Things is too optimistic, and the analysis of the Good New Things is too pessimistic.

Live Aid: Mick Jagger
and David Bowie
'Dancin in the Street'.



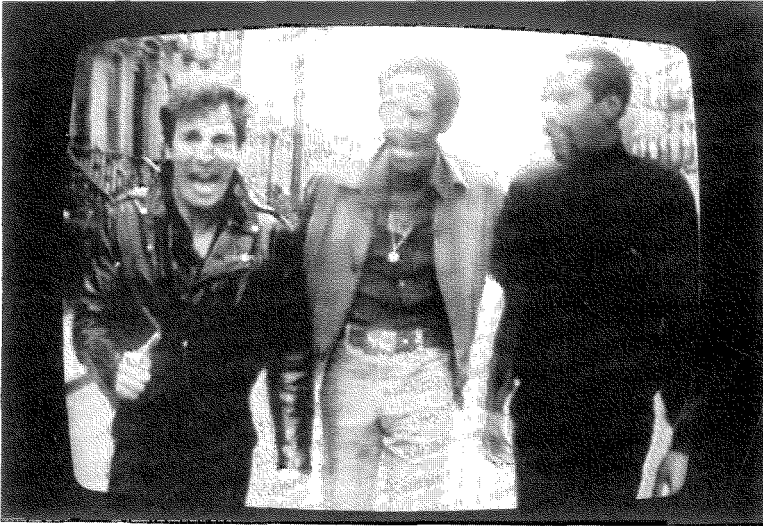
Thus the celebration of MTV's supposed reluctance to enter the symbolic realm doesn't tally with the liberal-humanist support for new developments like Live Aid and Artists Against Apartheid. If support for benefit pop is potentially progressive, then why celebrate incoherence? Meanwhile, the analysis of those trends is too dismissive. It gives way to bleak resignation when the world of everyday struggle is encountered: the United States, we are told, has lost 'any position from which to speak' (p 135). And yet pop-related projects like Live Aid, USA For Africa, Farm Aid, Amnesty International's Conspiracy Of Hope tour and Artists Against Apartheid were enormously popular, spoke from a socially active position, generated music videos and/or were given extensive coverage on MTV. Kaplan's comments on these events (which so evidently run against the grain of most postmodern analysis) are too fleeting, and once again to and fro between humanist approval and a deeply Frankfurtian pessimism.

It is very significant, in my view, that countervailing forces are dealt with outside the terms of Kaplan's reading of postmodern theory. For example: Bruce Springsteen, whose significance in contemporary pop is

hard to over-estimate, proves a serious hurdle. His influence is explained away by opting for an *auteurism* of convenience that contradicts the overall approach:

Springstein [sic] is personally unusual in the American rock scene in seeming to retain genuine identification with the working-class and generally 'oppressed' of this world. (p 72)

Even if that is true (and Steve Van Zandt, Los Lobos, U2, Jackson



Artists Against
Apartheid: Bruce
Springsteen (left)
pledges 'Ain't Gonna
Play Sun City'.

Browne and Peter Gabriel might have something to say about it), it evades the problem (for postmodern theory) of the enormous popularity of an old-fashioned liberal-humanist who articulates the classic values of 'authentic' American rock and roll²⁰. Kaplan's attempt to deal with this is unconvincing:

Fans evidently take Springstein's [sic] 'Born In The USA' as 'an exultant anthem for Reagan-era America'. (p 78)

The evidence for this observation is one article in *Newsweek*.

I'm not disputing that many Springsteen fans see him as a patriot (but what kind of patriot?), that events like Live Aid contain a very disturbing downside²¹ or that Reaganism has taken its toll on pop's countercultural assumptions. My point is not just that Kaplan's reading is too simple, but that it is so for very good reasons. Springsteen (and the socially-conscious movements that have sprung up in recent years) generally use realist discourses that don't fit Kaplan's scheme... and represent the sphere of everyday political struggle that postmodernism

²⁰ Lawrence Grossberg situates Springsteen in an account of postmodernity in 'Another Boring Day In Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment Of Everyday Life', *Popular Music* no 4, 1984.

²¹ See Stan Rijven, Greil Marcus and Will Straw, *Rock For Ethiopia*, International Association for the Study of Popular Music Working Paper no 7, IASPM, 1985.

²² See Edward Said, 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community', in Hal Foster (ed), *Postmodern Culture*, London, Pluto Press, 1985.

²³ Lisa A Lewis, 'Female Address In Music Video', *Journal Of Communication Inquiry*, Spring 1987; and 'Consumer Girl Culture: How Music Video Appeals To Women', *ONE TWO THREE FOUR: A Rock and Roll Quarterly* no 5, Spring 1987.

is fast becoming notorious for either misunderstanding or ignoring altogether²².

Something similar happens in the discussion of 'feminist' videos. Here, despite the assertion that in the postmodern world representations about representations are no longer necessarily subversive (were they ever?), it is precisely this element that seems to be at the heart of the textual analysis. The videos of Pat Benatar ('Sex As A Weapon', 'Love Is A Battlefield'), Donna Summer ('She Works Hard For The Money') and Cyndi Lauper ('Girls Just Want To Have Fun') are criticised on the familiar grounds that their 'realist strategies prevent any foregrounding of problems of female representation' (p 120).

The choice of clips which do achieve this is rather original. Mercifully, not avant-garde texts, but a selection of Tina Turner's videos:

One can argue that in a video like 'What's Love Got To Do With It?' Turner attempts to gain control over her own sexuality through deliberately enticing male desire. Her short tight leather skirt with the slit up the side, her bestockinged legs and high-heeled shoes are in this case arguably used simply to assert control over the males by refusing them what her dress seems to offer. (pp 122-3)

This may be a perfectly valid argument – but then why not also make it about other female pop stars whose videos use realist strategies? From the viewpoint of this male spectator, Tina Turner seems nearly always to be represented as an object of voyeuristic display (millions watched her at Live Aid having her skirt ripped off by Mick Jagger), where the younger stars like Madonna, Pat Benatar and also Janet Jackson (who all grew up with feminism) offer a wider range of readings, which include explicit contestation of sexism and its representations²³. That my read-



Tina Turner: 'What's Love Got To Do With It'

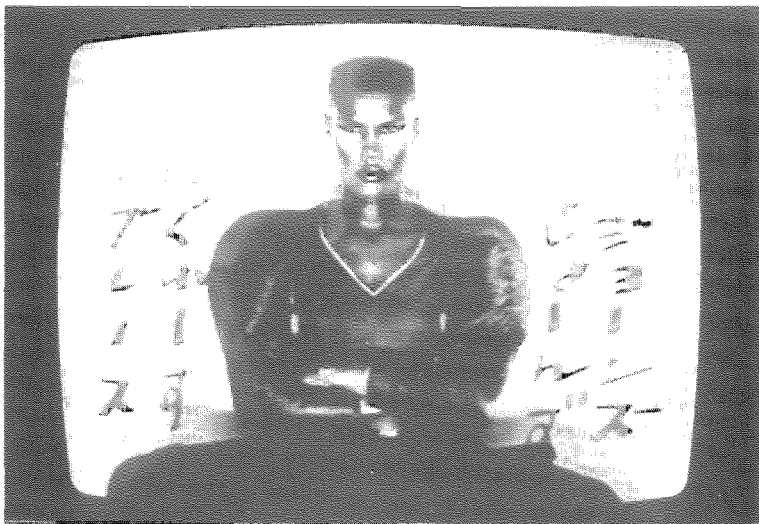
ing is entirely different does not of course invalidate Kaplan's interpretation, but it raises the awkward question of counter-readings. In my case these are probably informed by different generational inflections and an extra-textual element – for me, the meaning of Tina Turner in music video is intimately connected to her meaning in pop music culture. Reducing this complex question to the issue of the foregrounding of visual representation doesn't really tackle the problem; and while this is partially acknowledged by Kaplan in her discussion of different reading formations, it seems to have little bearing on her approach to individual texts.

Kaplan's argument is of course underpinned by her Lacanian position, which generates this strange, and rather revealing, observation:

It is significant that all the highly touted, artistically innovative or prize-winning experimental videos have been produced by male video directors for male stars or groups. . . . (this) reflects the dominance of white male figures in the rock video phenomenon and also perhaps addresses basic issues having to do with women's unconscious positioning in the phallic symbolic order. (p 120)

This argument reproduces a Lacanian viewpoint that has been hotly contested by many feminists, whose criticisms are referenced but not engaged with here. Fortunately, it is empirically wrong: we need only cite Laurie Anderson, Grace Jones, Kate Bush, Toni Basil, Tina Weymouth²⁴, and the highly touted, artistically innovative experimental video director Annabelle Jankel as contrary evidence. The Lacanian approach to subjectivity in cultural consumption is presented as if it were an unproblematic finished body of theory that merely awaits application to empirical material. It seems to me that it is much too early to

²⁴ I am not referring to Weymouth's involvement in the David Byrne/male-dominated group Talking Heads, but to her central participation in 'Tom Tom Club and their much-admired experimental video 'Genius Of Love'.



Grace Jones: the female performer as producer.

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- ²⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Debate: Psychology, Ideology and the Human Subject', *Ideology & Consciousness* no 3, Spring 1978; Christine Gledhill, 'Recent Developments in Feminist Film Theory', *Quarterly Review Of Film Studies*, vol 3 no 4, Fall 1978.
-

attempt to 'cash in' the Lacanian tradition, partly because Marxists and feminists have raised too many as yet unanswered questions about it²⁵.

The difficulty presented by these readings is this: if the analysis of Springsteen, benefit pop and the 'feminist' videos were correct, how could one possibly avoid cultural pessimism? Thus are we led into finding hope in schizophrenia. But perhaps the way out of the pessimism/optimism dilemma is to abandon the counter-cultural criteria that inform most writers in this debate. The world that Jameson and Kaplan describe is one in which we are less inclined to make simple-minded distinctions between what is 'real' and what is 'fake'. (The postmodernists sometimes formulate this as if media audiences were no longer able to make the distinction at all, or as if none exists, in which case there would surely be no conceivable grounds for optimism.) Counter-cultural notions of working 'outside' The System have given way to debates about how to operate within it. Ideas of musical 'progress' and the fetishisation of 'originality' in pop have been replaced with new interest in rock's roots, in early and pre-rock forms, and in a 'world music' that is consciously looking beyond the endless recycling of Anglo-American pop (witness the enormous success of Paul Simon's *Graceland* project). Male myths of rock rebellion have been reduced to Billy Idol's sneer, and movies like *Light Of Day* and *Sid And Nancy* construct new understandings of what it means to 'live' rock and roll. And the world's most important rock star isn't someone who tries to change the world by staying in bed (Lennon) or wearing Red Brigade T-shirts (Strummer) but who actually gives money to striking workers and relates to the 'squares' as well as the hip (Springsteen).

V.

Music video is a cultural form of growing importance, and it is one that is almost certainly here to stay. It is probably only a matter of time before it gains the cultural autonomy that Dave Laing noted as absent, perhaps through the development of direct commodity production for consumers (via the CD-V and long-form videos conceived simultaneously as sound and vision – e.g., the recent The The video/album 'Infected' and the forthcoming Peter Gabriel music video project); and via increased non-promotional production (e.g., TV shows tied to the music video format that are funded by broadcasters, as programming, not by the record companies, as advertising). In these circumstances – and assuming that MTV and services like it are here to stay – music video will become a permanent part of our media soundscape.

The debate about music video in the postmodern world poses two difficult problems for researchers. First, it has thrown up a massive body of 'new' theory to grapple with, so that there is now the risk of repeating the error of '70s theoreticism, in which older paradigms are carelessly

cast aside in favour of shiny new academic toys. Secondly, music video typifies a new world of cultural industries, in which convergence between previously separate media is becoming the norm. Thus understanding music video requires a firm grasp of studies in pop music, television and cinema, integration of these areas of study and more – not less – interaction between the disparate branches of media theory. When the dust finally settles around these embryonic debates about the form, its major effect may be to smuggle some of the interesting debates about pop music into the silent world of cultural studies.

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THE STORY CONTINUES...

BARRY KING RETURNS TO THE WISCONSIN PROJECT

¹ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.

² David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London, Methuen, 1985. I shall also examine Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film*, New York, Mouton, 1985. Page references will be included in parentheses in the text. All emphases in quotations are the authors'.

³ See Barry King, 'The Classical Hollywood Cinema', *Screen*, November-December 1986, vol 27 no 6, pp 74-88.

⁴ See Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna

IT SEEMS CERTAIN that the reader determined enough to continue the journey through the textual densities of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*¹ will experience some *déjà vu* in reading David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*². But although it offers moments of redundancy or, to speak positively, reinforcement alongside welcome elaboration, *Narration in the Fiction Film* in many ways marks a return to matters of textuality *per se*. If one takes the view, as I do, that the attempt in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* at setting textual processes into extra-textual determinants, especially those that relate, broadly, to the political economy of Hollywood, is flawed³, it by no means follows that the less dispersed arguments of this companion text and Edward Branigan's *Point of View in the Cinema* resolve the problem. While the greater connectedness of these works is – if not a sign of the problems of team writing – an ironic tribute to the old formalist injunction to set aside questions of what a text is about, how and why it appeared, in favour of how it is made, this is a small consolation.⁴ Once again, one is reminded of the fact that, in terms of our current abilities, an analysis which confines itself to one or other side of the textual/contextual divide is rewarded by economy and elegance, if only because it expands its explanation of a small range of data by ignoring, hence massively assuming, other determinants.

Naturally enough, given the challenge on several points – from deconstruction, Lacanian feminism and postmodernism – to the concept of a 'master' narrative of rationality, it is possible to see in this state of affairs a cause for celebration, not to mention a pretext for rejecting the project of these texts at the outset. Since my task is assessment, I can only gesture towards the radical incompatibility of this project with these other discursive practices. Like a docile formalist, I accept the constraint of

considering these texts on their own terms, the better, I think, to indicate what they systematically elide.

Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics*, Cambridge Mass, MIT, 1971, pp 274 ff.

57

I.

As pointed out in the first part of this review, the central concern of *Narration in the Fiction Film* is to set out a narrative poetics of film. Strictly speaking, Bordwell's point of entry into such an account, which will lead directly to an 'account of narrative activity in fictional cinema' (p xi) and ultimately to an 'historical poetics of cinema' (p 336), is via the specification of a poetics of narration. The latter is defined as 'narrative as a process, the activity of selecting, arranging and ordering story material in order to create specific time bound effects on the perceiver' (p xi). Such a process can on Bordwell's account be decisively separated out from a concern with narrative structure and the representational dimension of film narrative, of which 'there are virtually no theoretical studies, though some work in the theory of genre has been useful' (p xii).

Whether or not the primary distinction between narrative as process, structure and representation can be treated substantively as Bordwell implies, rather than as an analytical suspension of aspects that are subsequently reintegrated, is a moot point. At any rate, his intention is to use this trifurcation and isolation of narration as the metaphysical ground, in the Derridean sense, from which to 'touch' upon, i.e., use as an illustration, matters of representation and structure. One can only observe that other theorists of narrative have found this rather difficult to do.⁵ What, for example, is the representational dimension of narrative outside of genre as a matrix of 'world' and character states?

It is only appropriate to signal these questions here, since in the account that Bordwell offers these matters are given some indicative answers. For now it is clear enough that the poetics that Bordwell pursues is defined by this distinction and can be designated by

... a series of abstract questions. How does cinematic narration work? What does the spectator do in comprehending a narrative film? What features and structures solicit narrative comprehension. What roles can properties of the film medium play in the narrational process? (p xiii)

As the reader will notice, these four questions actually cover only two variables: narration and the spectator's activity as narrative comprehension, not in terms of structure or representation, but in terms of narrative as a process of selection. The poetics that is proposed, therefore, is confined to the space of these variables and their interaction. Given the focus on narration and the complementary process of spectator activity, how is this focus articulated theoretically? By two means: first, a critique of current theories of film narration and secondly, by the use as in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, albeit with some significant modifica-

⁵ For example, Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative', in Stephen Heath (ed), *Image, Music, Text*, London, Fontana, 1976. But see also Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*, London, Methuen, 1981, pp 145 ff.

tions, of the *fabula/suzyzhet* couplet. Since the latter is considered as definitively transcending the limits of the former, it is appropriate to consider them in order of presentation in the text.

According to Bordwell, film narration is composed of two discrete theoretical strands, which correspond to two discrete narrative modes of representation: mimesis (showing) and diegesis (telling). In literary theory, this distinction is deployed in the context of a discussion of the relationship between the narrator and the perspective which orients what is narrated, or point of view: a diegetic mode operates when the narrator is speaking and no one else; a mimetic when the narrator operates through an intermediary.⁶

Mimetic theories consequently treat narration in film as an act of showing or presenting an 'idealised' spectacle to an 'idealised' spectator, the latter being usually identified with the camera. Such a view is argued to be inadequate primarily on the grounds that it is difficult to account for some film techniques as the literal analogues of optical processes – e.g., split screens, impossible space and camera movement not renderable as shifts in 'natural' attention – and for the fact that the pro-filmic reality is in itself a representation (pp 10-11). Nevertheless, it can be argued that the 'impression of an invisible observer facing an autonomous world is an effect of the film's construction', provided that it is recognised that 'the invisible observer is not the basis of film style, but only one *figure* of style' (p 12). What is objectionable in mimetic approaches, however, is the depiction of the spectator as a passive recipient of spectacle.

Diegetic theories of narration variously argue that in fact all showing in fiction film is a form of telling. Accordingly, it is necessary to make the familiar distinction, following Benveniste, between texts in which the markers of the situation of uttering (pronouns, markers of place and time and intention) are suppressed (*histoire*) and those in which such markers are present (*discours*). This contrast, Bordwell points out, has been applied in film theory in two general directions: first, and here MacCabe's work on realism⁷ is the prime target, as a principle of structuration, where the level of *histoire* is conceived as a metalinguistic frame (transparent, 'real', omniscient) which grounds the text's discourse(s) and by a dialectical inflexion installs the metalanguage as a guarantor of the 'truth'; secondly, a more localised use of the contrast, which seeks to address the question of how traces of subjectivity are expressed or repressed textually and what such processes entail for patterns of identification and representation.

Assume the film, or some passage of it, to be the utterance. How do we find the enunciation? Who 'speaks' in a film? To whom is it addressed? In what circumstances is it spoken? What is the film's equivalent for person, tense, mode and other means of enunciation? (p 22)

Bordwell's appraisal of these sorts of attempts is sharp and needs more

⁶ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1980, pp 162 ff.

⁷ Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and Cinema', *Screen* Summer 1974, vol 15 no 2, pp 7-27; and 'Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure', *Screen* Autumn 1976, vol 17 no 3, pp 7-27.

attention than is possible here. He argues generally that Benveniste's categories have been:

(a) Misplaced. If one is to be faithful to the spirit of Benveniste's original distinction, then it is necessary to recognise that only individuals, as opposed to institutions such as the cinema, are enunciative. This corrective may, of course, only suggest that Metz is proposing to develop Benveniste in interesting ways. But even here Bordwell argues that Metz is perverse since he takes the fact that the cinema is a social institution that mediates in various ways a communicative relationship as a warrant to apply the *discours/histoire* contrast in a new way. Namely, to argue that the cinema is in a general sense enunciative (discursive) and so it follows that the absence of textual markers that declare this fact is a fundamental element of illusionism and the fetishisms orchestrated around the gaze. But the possibility that *discours* may 'masquerade' as *histoire* is not present in Benveniste: 'if a text effaces all marks of enunciation Benveniste calls it *histoire* pure and simple' (p 22).

Finally, Bordwell points out that Metz 'translates verbal activity (Benveniste's research object) into an optical activity: if the film "looks at me", it is discursive; if it does not, it remains *histoire*'; nor does Benveniste 'say that the reader of *histoire* thinks he or she created it' (p 23).

That this examination of Metz' 'Imaginary Signifier' arguments is slight is plain enough. Even if one accepts that Bordwell is not obliged to detour into a critique of Metz' attempt to establish a psychoanalytic account of cinema, it is worrying in terms of his own account that Bordwell translates the reader 'identifying with' into the reader 'thinking' he or she created the image in the space of a page. More interesting is the extent to which this opening of an account of diegetic theories of narration begins to hint at the difficulty of maintaining the distinction overall. I will say more on this below, but to show one neuralgic point here: another way to read Metz' theory is to see it as an attempt to come to grips with the enhanced illusionistic quality of the photographic 'record' or image in the context of conceiving of cinema *per se*, rather than any act of narration, as regulating the spectator's 'access' to the imaginary.⁸ Metz may be 'metaphorical' in his use of Benveniste, but, in his terms, the cinema is discursive (i.e., of the symbolic) prior to any specific act of enunciation. This primary identification, as opposed to the secondary or 'continued' identification offered by narrative flow which constitutes Bordwell's level of enquiry, is simply not engaged by the distinction between mimetic and diegetic modes of narration.

(b) Misdirected. Its comparison of film and language in an attempt to find visual correlates of the linguistic markers of *discours* is unsupportably literal. Taking Mark Nash's analysis of *Vampyr* as an example, Bordwell points to the difficulty of finding or justifying the category of person in terms of cinematic equivalents:

But what would a second-person image look like? Nash can find no instances because we have no idea of what could be the pertinent marks. Is the close-

⁸ Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, London, Macmillan, 1985, pp 42 ff. Bordwell also points out that Metz anthropomorphises the camera (p 24), so the arguments here also rest on the relation between narration and subjectivity, with which, as we shall see, Bordwell does not really engage. His reasons for this are summarised on page 30.

up overtly addressed to the reader? Is the carefully framed long shot? In effect, every shot or cut bears some trace of the author's address. (p 23)

If we leave the interrogation of the last comment on one side for a moment, the attempt to find enunciative markers, riven by theoretical inconsistency, leads to an 'ad hoc spotting of *discours*' and, once again, a drift towards mimetic assumptions, signalled by the privileging of camerawork and editing 'as the principal bases of enunciation, with the proviso that certain applications of them show strong marks' (p 24). Such attempts are seriously flawed in various ways, but primarily because they conflate the material divisions of the text with signifying divisions, they counterpose the pro-filmic world to the action of the cinematic apparatus, as if the latter were not in itself conventionalised, and they tend to privilege certain cinematic techniques over others, e.g., camerawork over *mise-en-scène*.

Interesting and substantial as Bordwell's criticisms may be, they are flawed by a systematic tendency to treat discourse in an overly empiricist manner. Thus the already noted tendency in his treatment of Metz to confuse discourse in the extended sense of an interpellation process with *discours* as a matter of enunciative markers:

For Jacqueline Suter, discourse is 'an ideological position from which a subject "speaks" (acts/interacts) within the social order': this formulation makes any social behaviour analogous to speech and renders discourse prior to any speech act – surely a vacuous use of terms. (p 24)

One needn't defend Suter's position to recognise that Bordwell simply misunderstands – or shall we say, does not sufficiently engage with – the sense of her argument. Even on his own account as the citation before last reveals, there is a sense in which all cinema is discursive since cultural action implies a subject, if only as a principle of textual coherence. To be sure, Bordwell's remarks on the unresolved tension in the literature between (his preferred definition) discourse as 'a piece of text' and discourse in the Foucauldian sense of discursive formation sounds an apt warning against confusion. Equally, the empirical question of whether or not a specific text carries through into its narrational strategy overt markers of the enunciating subject, and, in cases where it does not, how implicit traces of the 'enunciator' can be validly identified, is a matter that 'discourse' theory must address. At the same time Bordwell's conception of discourse as a piece of text – 'a discourse is, at least, a piece of text, and a reader's comprehension, however it may "unite" discourses, is not a piece of text' (p 341) – is deceptively concrete and unnecessarily restrictive.

On the matter of concreteness, it is clearly an apt response to Mark Nash's analysis of *Vampyr* to show that the postulated connection between verbal markers and, for example, shots is weak to non-existent. But to establish that the search for enunciative markers is, in principle,

futile requires a demonstration that other cinematic techniques – sound or music track, colour or, even, casting – will not establish an inferential context in which unmarked ‘objective’ shots are rendered ‘enunciative’. In this respect, one is reminded of Stephen Heath’s comments in ‘Narrative Space’ on ‘impossible’ camera placements: ‘the impossible place is entirely possible if held within a system that defines it as *such*, that it confirms in its signified exceptionality’⁹. That exception proves the rule, or that cinematic devices are substitutable in the context of a ‘mode of film practice’ is, of course, a very Bordwellian kind of argument. Consequently it is puzzling that Bordwell is not prepared to entertain an extended definition of discourse instead of regarding such a notion as tautological: ‘in effect, every shot or cut bears some trace of the author’s address’.

To spell this out, if it is true that in the case of a single text any given coding procedure finds its pertinence articulated by other coding procedures as a *context*, it also follows that any single text finds its context in other texts. Since these authors wish to argue that the context for any given text is not just any other texts, but rather a body of texts that can be validly characterised as a mode of film practice (and now a mode of narration), it is strange that the question of enunciation is not considered in the light of inferences set up by a particular mode and the empirical question of what happens in a film that might be validly held to fall under that mode. More generally, since these authors present a powerful case for the predominance of the ‘classical mode’ in mainstream cinema and argue that this mode sets up reiteratively a series of conventional assumptions that film space issues from and goes to a unified subject, it is strange that Bordwell does not wish to detail how this ‘enunciative’ framework bears on intratextual coding as a contribution to discourse theory. All of which points to the fact that the reasons for superseding enunciation theories do not rest *necessarily* on an incompatibility with the framework Bordwell wishes to advance. To anticipate slightly, clearly the manner in which the spectator’s activity is handled is pertinent here – spectators could, and many would suspect, often do, misread ‘objective’ shots as ‘authorial’. Apart from the matter of error, a full account of the spectator’s activity would have to elaborate in detail how expectations from other discourses and discursive practices orient readings. Since these other discursive practices – other, that is, than those set up in the public and private sphere by the social impact of the cinema, even if anticipated by the cinema at the point of reception – condition ‘readings’, questions of ‘enunciation’ and reception must take them into account. This is what Suter is getting at, and that is what treating discourse as ‘a piece of text’ – let alone the question of whether consciousness is in some sense a text and so on – will not. This will be all the more emphasised when we look at the theorisation of the spectator’s activity.

To sum up, Bordwell’s discussion of mimetic and diegetic theories is marred by a refusal to theorise the relationship between discourse in

⁹ Stephen Heath, ‘Narrative Space’, *Questions of Cinema*, London, Macmillan, 1981, p 51.

¹⁰ As we shall see, Branigan refuses this distinction and Bordwell enters a qualification that is intended to rescue the contrast.

general and discourse as a piece of text. To put it with unavoidable compression, the distinction between mimesis and diegesis is used by Bordwell as a second level construct set in an overall discursive context which is distinctively, though not exclusively, optical – whether one views this as an ontological fact, or, better, a cultural fact that has been invested with the tenacity of *being* through ideological mechanisms. In short, all telling in film finally resolves into showing.¹⁰

Overall, Bordwell's account of these theories of narration that he wishes to supersede with his own argues that mimetic theories are flawed and then goes on to show that diegetic theories are even more 'metaphorical' and, in the last analysis, only lead to an unsupportable retreat to mimetic assumptions. So pronounced is this retreat that it becomes not merely a problem for the authors he criticises, but also for Bordwell's own attempt to demonstrate that the dichotomy is in fact operative. The crux of this erosion seems to lie in Bordwell's tendency to treat the showing/telling distinction literally, as only having relevance at the level of the formal permutation of cinematic devices. This means that when confronting an account like Heath's 'Narrative Space', which seeks to integrate considerations of subject positioning on both the level of cinema as a discursive formation and in terms of narrational strategies, Bordwell treats positioning in the extended sense as 'metaphorical' and then proceeds to offer some problems at the level of instances of devices. The latter may be entirely proper, but not at the cost of scanting on the former.

II.

Given the weaknesses of mimetic and diegetic theories as Bordwell sees them – and the subsequently adduced and, clearly in his view, overriding belief that such theories *necessarily* entail the notion of viewer passivity (p 30) – Bordwell offers an account of narration that returns to the *fabula/syuzhet* contrast. 'The conception of syuzhet', he argues, avoids entrapment in 'surface-phenomena distinctions (such as person, tense, metalanguage) and relies on more supple principles basic to all narrative representation' (p 51). This acknowledgement, while emphasising once again the extent to which the application range of formalist categories rests on a high level of abstraction (or as Bordwell has it 'suppleness') also serves notice on those writers like Seymour Chatman, who have tended to equate *fabula/syuzhet* with the *histoire/discours* contrast (p 51).

As in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, though with some significant modifications, the *fabula* is not the pro-filmic event or a material entity present on image or sound track, but an inferential construct dependent on the spectator's activity. Such an activity is held to be conditioned mainly, and in so far as this account is concerned exclusively, by hypothetico-deductive processes: the operation of perceptual/cognitive patterns or schemata which are specific to the central spectator goal of

constructing an intelligible story (p 33). Here *syuzhet* is no longer, as in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, a category that engrosses narration, but a key textual system that denotes 'the architectonics of the film's presentation of the fabula' (p 50). It is worth noting that the film's *fabula* is on this definition not a material presence on screen, but rather a 'presence' cued by the *syuzhet*. The principles by which the *syuzhet* cues the reader to construct the *fabula* are, as before, causal logic, the patterning of events in respect of order of occurrence, frequency, duration and space.

The second major system that cues the spectator is style. Bordwell's treatment remains ambiguous. What is clear is that style suffers a (timely?) unseating from its place in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. In this latter text, style had a much larger role to play, installing a level of analysis that engrossed both *syuzhet* and what in the current book is now defined as the aggregate process of *syuzhet* and style: narration. This comprehensiveness, not helped by a certain definitional looseness implicit in such substitutions as classical style, classical film, classical paradigm, film form, film style, etc, in my view caused the singular disadvantage of incipient circularity: wherein Mr Style was in the fortunate position of only finding in the cinema his own family. It is perhaps in recognition of these difficulties that style undergoes a dramatic reduction and finds the master suite now occupied by narration. But if the logical repositioning is clear, the definition of style is less so:

Style also constitutes a system in that it too mobilizes components – particular instantiations of film techniques – according to principles of organization. There are other uses of the term 'style' (e.g., to designate recurrent features of structure or texture in a body of films, such as 'neorealist style'), but in this context, 'style' simply names the film's systematic use of cinematic devices. Style is thus wholly ingredient to the medium. (p 50)

Apart from the fact that in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* the extended definition of style was clearly in evidence, it is not entirely clear that 'particular instantiations of film techniques' or 'the film's systematic use of cinematic devices' are not merely circumlocutions for the extended concept – if a use is 'systematic' it may pertain to a body of films and so on. If one takes it, however, that style now means merely *à la* Barry Salt¹¹ the enumeration of the use of devices – camera movement, placement, lighting, etc – as occurring in a particular film then that is another matter. As we shall see, Bordwell actually wants to preserve both senses – by means of speaking of extrinsic and intrinsic norms – but even if one allows him to have it both ways, there is another problem. The restricted definition is not, in fact, that restricted since it could be held to cover all devices mobilised in a text – from camerawork and editing, through to set design, performance and so on. Further clarification will doubtless be forthcoming, but this slippage has some serious consequences in relation to parametric narration, as we shall see.

¹¹ Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, London, Starword, 1983.

This reduction of style is accompanied by an explicit recognition that aspects of style are not subsumable under the analysis here – moments of ‘sheer perceptual salience’ or excess. This limitation is matched, it is worth noting, by the exclusion of any consideration of ‘affect’ in so far as it is not bound up with matters of cognition (p 39). What is apparent in this redistribution – a major shift if only signalled in a footnote – is that the three levels or aspects of style operative in the earlier work have now been redefined as two autonomous but interactive systems. *Syuzhet* – ‘the dramaturgy of the fiction film’ – and style – ‘the film’s technical embodiment’ – now constitute (articulate or are articulated by?) narration, which ‘is the process whereby the film’s *syuzhet* and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator’s construction of *fabula*’ (p 52).

In the classical film, style is mainly subordinated to *syuzhet*. So that the spectator’s entry (especially given the exclusion of excess) into the process of *fabula* construction can be viewed as a path of differential access determined by the *syuzhet*’s manipulation of event logic, time and space. The spectator, more the subject of information processing than a concrete individual, is envisaged as alertly poised before the *syuzhet*, flushed with investigative zeal and in search of the *fabula* – the implied story.

Given this definition of narration, which is less about what it is than about what it does, it is possible to produce what was gestured towards, albeit under a slightly different regime, in the closing pages of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*: a typology of modes of narration. But before approaching this matter directly, it is appropriate, in view of the extent to which the issue of definitional change underwrites this latter text, to remark briefly on its consequences. As noted earlier, Bordwell regards the downgrading of style in favour of narration as leaving the analytical claims in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* untouched. Yet it is difficult to believe that the earlier conclusions could still retain their integrity. To take one example, if style on the new specification is better conceived as a quasi-autonomous system, which in the case of parametric narration, and more important, parametric ‘moments’ in classical narration, resumes an efficacy of its own, then the notion in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* that innovation in ‘devices’ does not change, but is merely absorbed by, the classical paradigm, confuses the stability of terms with the stability of the things they are meant to describe. The inherence of the classical paradigm may owe more to its level of abstraction as a term, than to its ability to specify the particular development of the things it is meant to describe. This is not even to debate the question of whether Classical Narration is a term that is conceptually congruent with Classical Style, mode of film practice with a narrational mode, and so on.

A narrational mode is a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction. . . . any film can be seen as seeking to meet or not meet a coherent standard established by fiat or previous practice. (p 150)

If a set of norms of narrational construction can be held to characterise a mode of narration – the question of the relation of the latter to a mode of production notwithstanding¹² – such a norm-set operates as an extrinsic ‘background’ to the norms established by a specific text, which may more or less deviate from it. Such norms as the text establishes are intrinsic norms which derive from the specific narrational work of the text in delivering the *syuzhet* or *fabula* ‘cues’.

Bordwell then distinguishes by means of a close textual analysis, which lacks none of his usual virtuosity, four modes of narration. It is worth emphasising, as he indeed does, that the ‘procedural schema’ entailed by a distinctive mode can be operated synchronically, with greater or lesser applicability, in respect of a single text or part thereof (p 149). However, since each mode, and the norms that unify it, must by definition set a limit on what is compositionally possible, it follows that what is a compositional option in one mode is ruled out in another (pp 150-151).

In a complementary fashion, spectator comprehension is seen as resting on the deployment of schemata, in which extrinsic narrational norms have the paramount role:

Not all schemata are norm-derived, however. My expectations about what a fictional dog will do may be based on a schema derived from the behaviour of my faithful Shep. We must limit ourselves, as I have at the outset, to those schemata which are historically intersubjective and characteristic of the formal process of narrative comprehension. (pp 151-152) .

If we leave on one side what Shep might have to tell us about the limits of conventionality, it is clear that the ‘historical intersubjectivity’ presumed to be pertinent to a reading of a film is not cultural, but subcultural; the comprehension of a film is held to rest on an immanent reference to the norms of the mode, with deviations from these norms – the intrinsic norms – only gaining intelligibility from this relationship. Whether it is appropriate to speak as Bordwell does of the spectator’s activity as opposed to the ‘cineliterate’ spectator’s activity is a moot point. Does this account imply the notion of one good reading?

These queries on one side, the four narrational modes that Bordwell identifies are:

Classical – as already detailed in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, with the emphasis on the connection between the ‘canonic story’ and the *fabula-syuzhet* gearing of the typical studio product: character-centred causality built around protagonist(s) oriented by a goal-centred scheme

¹² As is only consistent, Bordwell links the ‘conservative, norm-abiding aspects of Hollywood filmmaking to the studio system’s standardized division of labour’ (p 154). For my criticisms of this attempt, see part one of this review.

of action, in a tightly controlled movement from initial state to disturbance to restabilisation.

Art Cinema – marked in contrast by an overriding claim to realism and realistic motivation; this putative fidelity to the ‘real’ processes and tempi of everyday existence, entailing weak causal links, an aleatoric storyline and a modelling of subjective experience through characters who lack clear-cut motives, traits and goals. This weakening of causal and character consistency leads in turn to an episodic narrative structure that resists closure and an emergent ‘inquiry into character’ and subjectivity as the prime thematic material. The weakening or distancing of the *syuzhet*’s presentation of the *fabula* is matched by an emphasis on authorial commentary or stylistic markers of authorial presence as a mechanism for binding over gaps (p 206 ff).

Historical-Materialist Narration – exemplified by the Soviet film, especially of the ’20s and early ’30s, in which narration assumes a rhetorical function with the *syuzhet* operating as ‘both a narrative and an argument’. The world of the *fabula* stands for a series of abstract propositions or political objectives – e.g., ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ – which the narrational processes present didactically to the spectator. Narration in this mode is overt and self-conscious, but also hortatory. The use of montage, which emphasises parallels between events rather than causal linkages, and the use of fast cutting create unpredictable narration. This uncertainty forces the spectator to depart from the dogged following of the *syuzhet* towards the formation of deductive connections and the level of connotation or myth (p 248 ff).

Parametric Narration – marked primarily by a shift in film style from a position of subordination to *syuzhet* patterning or a form of narration that limits itself to presenting events in a manner that displays style. Accordingly, in this mode ‘stylistic’ factors – such as figure position, composition, camera position and angle – assume some of the patterning and organising functions effected by the *syuzhet* under classical narration, imposing a temporal and spatial logic of their own. The basic discriminator in parametric narration is its mode of selection from, for example, the classical paradigm, which can be sparse or replete. The repetition of certain ‘impersonal’ stylistic configurations within a text sets up an intrinsic norm which is self-justifying, i.e., lacks adequate realistic, compositional and transtextual motivation, and subsists in the recursive application of stylistic figures which spatially pattern the film. This patterning laid over the ‘normal’ processing of the *syuzhet* creates obstacles for the spectator’s construction of a linear *fabula*, presenting a ‘richness of texture that resists interpretation’ (p 289). Since Bordwell has ruled out the consideration of ‘excess’, such a richness of texture must nonetheless be considered in terms of its narrational function.

This exposition, which is intended to provide an empirical demonstration of the efficacy of Bordwell’s theory of narration, concludes with a case study of Jean-Luc Godard whose films ‘remain elusive on a simple denotative level’ and ‘invite interpretations, but discourage, even defy,

IV.

Given this necessarily compressed exposition, I want to note some problems which seem unresolved, despite the undeniable richness of example and argument.

In its general configuration, the analysis of *Narration in the Fiction Film* does not escape the far from unexpected charge, given the genealogy of the author's theory, of prioritising the elaboration of order over the elaboration of meaning. There is no reason in principle to reject an account that focuses on matters of syntax at the avowedly abstract level introduced by Bordwell's rendering of the *fabula/syuzhet* contrast. Generally speaking, and here Franco Moretti provides a useful account, it is no less reductive to see meaning as the exclusive provenance of the 'paradigmatic substructure' as it is to take the view, traditionally ascribed to formalism, that plot and syntax solely determine what 'content' can mean. Rather it is necessary to correlate these two aspects in any analysis that has a pretension towards comprehensiveness.¹³ There are obvious 'clues' that this is Bordwell's intention too. Thus, for example, in discussing parametric narration – in his view an exceptional case – he makes explicit use of Ernst Gombrich's contrast between 'the perception of *meaning* which ... (Gombrich) ... links to representational art and the perception of *order* which ... (Gombrich) ... associates with decorative and abstract art' (p 283). A citation which evidently means that other historical modes of narration are to a large degree implicated in meaning.

Again in relation to the specification of the spectator's activity Bordwell wishes to operate a distinction between a viewing and a reading:

*Viewing is synoptic, tied to the time of the text's presentation, and literal; it does not require translation into verbal terms. Interpreting (reading) is dis-
sective, free of the text's temporality, and symbolic; it relies on propositional
language.* (p 32)

Yet in his explanation of viewing – which is moreover signalled as the concern of the book – he identifies, alongside perceptual capacities and the material and structure of the film itself, the role of prior knowledge and experience:

*... in watching a representational film, we draw on schemata derived from
our transactions with the everyday world, with other artworks and with
other films.* (p 32)

This additional dimension of experience incites the suspicion that the

¹³ See Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, London, Verso, 1983, pp 130 ff.

real contrast is between different kinds of readings with different kinds of competences. I will return to this, but for now let me note that in demonstrating the fruitfulness of the *fabula/syuzhet* contrast Bordwell is led again and again to fill out the analysis with (rather good as it happens) 'commonsense' descriptions of character orientation and action. It seems likely, therefore, that he would bridle at the claim that his account does not aim to affect a synthesis of order and meaning. His concluding remarks, for instance, claim to offer a partial theory of narration, useful for recasting theories of ideology, genre, auteurism and subjectivity in cinema (p 334). Yet when meaning, especially as a matter of audience experience, figures in Bordwell's account it does so in a state of *negation*: it has a diffuse but important causal weight in his account which is only systematically recognised via the reductive contrast of *fabula/syuzhet*.

To establish this claim, at least provisionally, it is useful to begin with the distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet* which is regarded by Bordwell as equivalent to the contrast story/plot. While narratology is undoubtedly marked by terminological unevenness¹⁴, it is nevertheless important to attempt some consistency of definition. As Bordwell's key source, Meir Sternberg, points out, the contrast between *fabula* and *syuzhet* is not in fact structurally congruent with the contrast between story and plot. The former, both as a spectator construct and a textual process, refers to higher level syntactic operations, whereas the latter refers to causal (plot) and temporal (story) determinations that are embedded in the relationship among actants, events, space and time.¹⁵ It is true that these latter relationships are both logical and conventionally restricted, and one may wish to disagree with the characterisation of conventions as 'the interpretation, by historically and culturally determined groups, of logical rules in concrete situations'¹⁶. But the general point, that such hermeneutic materials can only be reductively left out of an account of the process of narration, still stands. Equally, at this level of narrative articulation it is possible to identify agents which have no direct function in narration and yet operate as representational supports and the 'conditions of entry' into narrational processing.

Naturally enough, it is unreasonable to expect analytical categories to detail all the phenomena they are intended to cover. But it is far from clear how exhaustive the *fabula/syuzhet* distinction is supposed to be or even if it is actually adequate to bear the elaborative weight that Bordwell gives it. For one thing, while the distinction between *fabula/syuzhet*: story/plot is not formally addressed, the text of *Narration in the Fiction Film* is marked by the use of all four terms. Again, while Bordwell points out that the *syuzhet* is an abstraction from the phenomenal surface, there are other formulations that suggest that the *fabula/syuzhet* contrast is more substantive:

The perceiver, given a narrative text, is invited to recognise a syuzhet and infer a fabula from it, whereas the artist constructs a syuzhet according to assumptions about how the spectator could infer a fabula from it. (p 345)

¹⁴ See Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp 169 ff and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, London, Methuen, 1983. The latter finds this unevenness so profound that she refuses to arbitrate over competing definitions (p 133). More's the pity.

¹⁵ Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, pp 8-10.

¹⁶ Mieke Bal, *Narratology*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985, p 25. In this respect, Shklovsky's broad definition of *fabula* as 'pre-existent' story material at least has the advantage of signalling that the *fabula* is 'material' and 'noumenal'. See Bordwell's remarks in note 7, p 344.

Such a statement, innocent enough if one assumes that *syuzhet/plot* and *fabula/story* are coterminous, is all the more reductive in an argument that never actually addresses the articulatory relationship between these variables and engages in rather heavy polemic against 'thematic' criticism (p 72 and p 282). Despite certain ambiguities in formulation, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that Bordwell's terms are not merely determinative, but exhaustive:

It is true that analogies and contrasts of situation of character occur in classical films, but these relations are typically dependent upon logically prior causal relations. (p 349)

In short, *syuzhet* logic overrides the situational logics of genre.¹⁷

These sorts of criticisms still have a principally literary flavour – which may in itself be a testament to the literary pedigree of Bordwell's theory as compared to his empirical analysis. But allowing for that, the usefulness of the *syuzhet/fabula* contrast seems problematic, not to mention what rests on it, e.g., the specification of narrational modes. Consider the following:

It would be an error to take the fabula, or story, as the profilmic event. A film's fabula is never materially present on the screen or soundtrack. When we see a shot of Jeff looking out of his window, his action is a representation which signals us to infer a story event (Jeff looks out of his window). The same piece of information might have been conveyed in other ways. (p 49)

One would want to concur with the last sentence certainly, but the contention that the *fabula* is never materially present on screen or by extension is purely a mental construct delivered by the *syuzhet* is another. On the contrary, it is possible to take the view, without falling into the ontological fallacy – that film presents, rather than represents, the extracinematic – that the denotative level of film is not composed entirely of abstract signifiers that await the ordering of the text to invest them with meaning. Some of the signifiers on screen, if under the regime of representation of the text, nevertheless have meaning in relation to conventions which are extracinematic, even if they present the 'cinematic apparatus' with problems of working these conditions of reference through textually, e.g., location shots, physical shape of the seen environment, actors' physical characteristics. The presence of this potential conflict and its suppression is after all one of the key operations of 'realism'.

While I cannot pursue matters further here, the basic issue rests on the kinds of relations of reference that photography and, by extension, cinematography sets up by its action as a medium. In general terms, Barthes summarises the issue well enough:

Photography's Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of

¹⁷ 'Every significant genre is a complex system of means and methods for the conscious control and finalization of reality': MM Bakhtin, PN Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Poetics*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p 133, cited in Andrew Britton, Katharine Hepburn: *The Thirties and After*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyneside Cinema Publications, 1984, p 68, where a more extensive treatment of the point can be found.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London, Flamingo, 1986, p 76.

¹⁹ See Umberto Eco, 'Articulations of the Cinematic Code', *Cinematics*, no 1, January 1970, pp 5-9, and *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1976, p 216. In the latter, Eco argues that iconism is not a single phenomenon, since it entails conventional and motivated elements, and possibly perceptual processing. It might be better to define the visual sign as semantically dense compared to the verbal sign. See also WJT Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp 53-74; Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1981, pp 52 ff and pp 85 ff; and EH Gombrich, 'Image and Code', in Wendy Steiner (ed), *Image and Code*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1981. N.B. in what follows, I shall use the short form 'the materiality of the cinematic sign' for the 'culturally determined materiality etc'.

²⁰ See Tzvetan Todorov (ed), *French Literary Theory Today*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p 6, and, in a more epistemological vein, Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1980, vol 7 no 1, pp 55-71 esp p 65.

representation. I call 'photographic referent' not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often 'chimeras'. Contrary to these imitations, in *Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there*.¹⁸

What this means, in short, is that the cinematic signifier is always to some extent an *analogon* – that is, its appearance on screen is, especially under a realist regime, always conditioned by relations of indexicality (where there is an existential 'bond' between sign and referent) and iconicity (where the sign and referent have a relation of resemblance). The pertinence of Bordwell's account is, it follows, that only if one defines the *fabula* as a mental event is it really meaningful to say the *fabula* is never materially present on screen. In part it is, even though the *syuzhet* invests it with a 'new' meaning.

In more general terms, despite the concessions that Gombrich, a key source, has made to environmentalist theories of perception, Bordwell's account veers uncertainly towards an over-conventionalist view of signification. First, there is an absence of discussion of indexicality, which seems especially disabling given that figurative texts are, in fact, most often the texts of performances which are necessarily, if problematically, replete with existential 'connections'. Second, since it needs to be recognised that indexicality as a phenomenon is very often combined with iconic relations – e.g., Kim Basinger is both a female and a 'feminine' star, though a specific performance may undercut or shift the meaning of the latter – there is a parallel lack of a discussion of the limits of conventionalism.¹⁹ Probably, the most immediate expression of this latter tendency is to be found in the fact that genre as a site of determination is accorded merely a supportive, rather than determinative, role in relation to the ordering work of the *syuzhet*. It is by no means a settled matter that a poetics of narrative is plausible outside of the study of genres as the historically given instances of narration.²⁰ Again, it remains debatable that the categories of narrative logic, space and time are the cause rather than the result or even a verbal summary of the generic processes.

To be fair, Bordwell does address genre more directly in this later text, but even here there is a tendency to reduce, for example, the detective film, to the dramaturgical premise 'suspense' (pp 64 ff). Again, in the discussion of spectator schemata, prototype schemata which indicate generic variables are seen as less useful than template schemata which act as data processors (p 34). These latter processes, which are governed by a rather Kantian synthetic *a priori* 'narrative structure' over which sit the categories of space and time, are *supratextual* rather than *transtextual*. Consequently, one would look in vain for a substantive account of the 'reading' process that engages with what Genette has termed a *topic*

competence based on 'the treasury of subjects and forms that constitute the common wealth of tradition and culture'.²¹ Such a grounded competence, especially pertinent to popular culture, barely engages the higher level 'perceptual schemata' which emerge as self-sustaining.

V.

The theoretical apparatus adopted here seems, despite Bordwell's disavowals, to be radically incompatible with psychoanalytic accounts of the cinema. The points of purchase for such accounts, it will be recalled, are (a) the process of identification implicit in the orchestration of the 'look' on and off screen; (b) a less developed psychoanalytic account that emphasises the 'aesthetic materiality' of the cinematic experience 'outside' the social or symbolic content of films. As regards the latter, the suppression of the analogon implicit in Bordwell's analysis would seem to present an implacable obstacle.

As regards the former, the main scenario in which such an account is 'laid to rest' is in the discussion of suture. Bordwell's basic argument, which is convincing, is that existing accounts depart from Oudart in erroneously locating the process of suture at the level of a literal perspectival orchestration of character looks, rather than in the filmic space between what is shown and the process of narration (pp 110-112). Even this latter rendering would not necessarily be incompatible with a totalised psychoanalytic account which equated the action of the discourse *per se* with the inscription of, for example, a patriarchal subjectivity in general²². However, since Bordwell has ruled out of consideration the process of subject positioning (mimetic or diegetic) in his account of narration, even this avenue is closed.

Yet there are signs of the 'return of the repressed' in his willingness to argue that the narrational process may at times more or less 'mimic' a communication process, emitting 'cues' that suggest a narrator and oscillate between a more or less marked *histoire/discours* mode (p 62). Such a statement might be seen as suggesting that the *syuzhet/fabula* couplet has it both ways, removing the spectator from a direct relationship of determination with the 'work' of the text, while allowing that such 'work' may entail positioning. At any rate an 'enunciation' theorist would be entitled to ask for a more detailed specification of what such 'cues' would be, since 'more or less' seems to indicate a more extensive range of phenomena than indicated by 'gaps' and retardation in narration.

Turning to the discussion of historical modes of narration, I would take the view that the gaps in the depiction of the classical mode carry over into the discussion of these alternate modes. At the same time, if one recognises that the treatment here is in the spirit of establishing useful generalisations about the epistemological features of each mode, I would agree – and I think most readers will – that these specifications have heuristic value. But since there is more at stake than this some

²¹ Gerard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1982, p 16.

²² See Gertrud Koch, 'Ex-Changing the Gaze: Re-Visioning Feminist Film Theory', *New German Critique*, No 34, Winter 1985, pp 139-153, esp p 149.

reservations need to be signalled. It is noticeable, especially in the case of art cinema and historical materialist narration, that many of the 'thematic' elements which are underarticulated within the general discussion of narration resurface. (Let us recall that this discussion equates the classical mode with the canonical story format and the fundamental determinants of perception in western culture.) Thus, markers of authority and rhetoric, strongly articulated generic temporal, spatial and causal chains are presented as the *differentia specifica* of these modes. A number of expositional points can be raised here. How adequate is the distinction between genre and mode? To what extent are narrational modes being depicted rather than modes of reading, since Bordwell points out that the reading protocols appropriate to each mode could be applied to any mode, with greater or lesser success? One overriding consideration seems worth emphasising – the methodological order of Bordwell's account, the contrast of the classical mode, 'an excessively obvious cinema', against increasingly rhetoricised and ideological variants has the unhappy effect of underplaying the extent to which the classical mode is itself ideological. As pointed out in the first part of this review, such a tension was already set up in the 'para-ideological' treatment of the classical cinema. Since I do not believe that Bordwell would actually wish to endorse the view that Hollywood is non-ideological, it is perhaps more accurate to say that his account is marked by a view of ideology as consciously evidenced political/rhetorical purpose over the view of ideology as imaginary 'interpellation'. Such may be the effect, if not the intention of his overall arguments.

In many ways the discussion of parametric narration constitutes a critical case for Bordwell's arguments. In principle, the differentiation of this mode rests on the issue of perceptibility: stylistic figuration must not rupture the hold of narrativity and yet must be sufficiently salient to be perceived. This sets up the need for a 'not-too-obtrusive' view of style. This need is met in a number of ways but chiefly by the decision to treat, in detail, films in the 'sparse' stylistic paradigm range, with the consequence that perceptibility becomes a problem (pp 283-284 and pp 285-286). An initial qualification that Bordwell offer is that the kind of perception at issue here is of 'order' rather than 'meaning'. But if we take this as given, the question remains how the work of style is to be recognised. The way out of this dilemma is at first circular – 'the most clear-cut cases of parametric narration can definitively be perceived in viewing' (p 284) – and then by analogy: that compared to integral serial music, which is argued to be a potent aesthetic source of influence via literature, parametric narration, in its sparse variant, enables stylistic events to be noticed and the relation to the *syuzhet* to be hypothesised (p 284). Serialism in music can be totally serial, whereas parametric narration is not because it is 'sufficiently' redundant, locatable in prior schema, e.g., predictable plots and 'natural' perception, and not prone to channel overload. While Bordwell does suggest that 'unseen'

structures can play some broader role 'in our response to film', the emphasis here is very firmly on recognition.

In this mode, the spectator's task becomes one of recognizing stylistic repetition and staying alert for more or less distinct variations. (p 287)

Once again, one is entitled to wonder what weight should be attributed to the view that the processes entailed are preconscious. The reliance on intentional spectator activity seems more or less total, because non-recognisable 'effects' are merely seen as a barrier to comprehension (p 306). But what is entailed here is not just an overly rationalistic view of film 'impact', but also the desire to squeeze the analogic elements of cinematic signification into an overly digitalised framework.

At times this desire tends to unsettle, or, at least, leave in a state of irreconciliation, the relationship between theory and the characteristically lucid descriptions of specific film texts that are intended to exemplify theory.

Thus, the analysis of Bresson's *Pickpocket*, useful in itself, sits uneasily with the general discussion of parametric narration. For one thing, the problem of providing a nominal definition of style resurfaces since the exemplification of the 'sparse or ascetic' parametric option rests primarily on spare, repetitive camerawork, yet as the depiction unfolds the impact and incidence of the film's intrinsic norm seems to derive from dialogue (p 290), a marked *syuzhet* manipulation of *fabula* (p 290), a manipulation of soundtrack, acting performance and *mise-en-scène* (pp 292-93). Given this unremitting expansion, one begins to wonder why this particular text is, especially, an example of 'sparse' parametric narration as Bordwell defines it. Indeed, if the sparse option is so comprehensive, the reader may be left wondering what 'replete' parametric narration would look like.

Bordwell's answer would, on his account, be twofold. First, 'replete' narration tends to foreground stylistic events in a manner that 'creates deviations in the film' (p 285) – which is to say, the *narrative* film considered in an argumentative context that rules out the ruptural effects of spectacle and excess on the narrative processing of the *syuzhet*. Second, given this overall definitional constraint, the difference between the sparse or replete options is argued to rest on 'material' similarities:

Typically, the ascetic option presents a material similarity of procedures across differentiated syuzhet passages; the replete option creates parallels among distinct portions of the syuzhet and varies the material procedures used to present them. (p 285)

But the implied answer that style is a matter of material similarities and procedures, while seemingly concrete, is inherently ambiguous. As is apparent in the *Pickpocket* analysis the materials of style comprise ele-

ments that are formally the same – same shot, same setting – and elements that are only similar at the level of meaning – performance, dialogue. In short, *pace* Bordwell's contention that parametric narration is about order rather than meaning, his actual description promiscuously mixes these dimensions in building a case for the autonomy of style.

Apart from the problem of definitional economy, it is not shameless auteurism – since I would want to endorse Bordwell's view that an emphasis on narrational strategy provides a way out of the humanistic thicket – to point out that Bresson's own account of his narrational strategy seems better placed to respect the distinction between sparseness of technique and the emergent richness of meaning:

*If an image, looked at by itself, expresses something sharply, if it involves an interpretation, it will not be transformed on contact with other images. The other images will have no power over it, and it will have no power over the other images. Neither action nor reaction.*²³

Parametric narration may present a 'texture that resists interpretation', but like all processes of signification it entails meaning, however elusive or (given Bresson's heightened commitment to photographic essentialism) mystical this may be.

Generally speaking, of course, one recognises that certain films foreground or minimise technique and it is this factor that Bordwell is trying, in an attempt that probably exceeds anybody else's to date, to pin down. But it is difficult to see how Bordwell's very general case can be accepted since he is in fact attempting a precise analytic exercise: to distinguish a mode of all forms of narration. If the differences identified at the level of individual texts seems persuasive, it remains uncertain that the theoretical apparatus he deploys is precise enough to establish the global integrity of each mode. Thus, parallelism 'among distinct portions of the *syuzhet*' characteristic of replete parametric narration (p 285) is also a feature of *Storm over Asia*, an example of historical materialist narration (p 248). Since Bordwell has suggested that any single film may contain elements of all forms of narration, this contingency is technically covered. But the general point remains: if we argue that modes of narration are worth identifying, does the restrictive and, at bottom, elusive contrast of *syuzhet* and style put the difference where the difference lies?

What is at stake is a process of textual reduction in favour of a particular kind of reading. As Bordwell admits, the recognition of parametric patterning may rest on a particular economy of consumption, entailing training, practice and knowledge and, in some cases, time and access to appropriate technology, such as a viewing table (p 283). And what applies to the critical case of parametric narration applies to all the modes identified. It is clearly correct to offer a critique of the 'common-sense' view of film *a fortiori* when such a view is shamelessly reproduced by those who have the socially endorsed role of critics. But it is another

matter to counterpose an 'expert' reading to a 'lay' reading in a manner which conceives of the latter commonsense or thematic reading as an error. Rather, it is more adequate to offer a realist reading, in the philosophical sense, which explains the 'surfaces' of the lay reading as a result of underlying textual mechanisms.²⁴ Is there not a certain positivist fervour in an account that offers a theoretical apparatus for a 'correct' reading and merely casts the reader in its own image?

²⁴ Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality*, London, British Film Institute, 1980.

VI.

For reasons that will become apparent I think Edward Branigan's *Point of View in the Cinema*, though published earlier, offers a viable resolution of many of the difficulties of Bordwell's account. The main difficulty with the latter text is that it contains a lengthy description of narration without giving an adequate account of narration as a process of subjectivity. At best, *Narration in the Fiction Film* gestures towards the narrational instance and subjectivity as a textual effect – mimicry of the communication process – and, at worst, it tends to personify *syuzhet* and stylistic processes: 'the style confines itself to those *syuzhet* acts it can process within its limits and with regard to its own patterns' (p 303). Branigan's account, by contrast, is careful to explicate the relationship between narration and subjectivity, as an articulation between levels of the narrating instance contingent within a specifiable text. To bring this out it is necessary to follow Branigan's specifications.

The term narration – 'a linguistic and logical relationship posed by the text as a condition of its intelligibility' (p 4) – rests on the familiar *enounced* and *enunciation* distinction, but the span of relevance of the narrational process is limited to a subsystem of the 'totality of meaning generated by a textual system' (p 2). The latter system – discourse – operates as a ground in which narration inscribes certain effects whose consequences are only partially accounted for by its action. Such agnosticism avoids the difficulties of Bordwell's model which tends to equate narration with the total order of the text minus destabilising moments of excess. Branigan's approach is marked by a serviceable restriction, which if not likely to account for cinematic representation *in toto* – anthropomorphic as well as zoomorphic and cosmomorphic representations – nevertheless advances the theorisation of subjectivity which remains ingredient to the theory of ideology. Equally, those who wish to argue for the potential challenge of so-called non-representational signs (sound, colour, music) to a patriarchally structured subject, will find Branigan's delineation of the limits of subjectivity in film useful, even if the interior of his specification is arguably complicit in its presentation of a subjectivity beyond gender or for that matter sexuality, race and class.

The key conceptual term in Branigan's account is, however, level of narration – 'where a traditional critic speaks of "levels of reality" in an

²⁵ The debt to Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, op cit, is apparent and acknowledged. Branigan accuses Genette of 'realist' overtones in his terminology, e.g., 'voices'. See p 43.

artwork, I prefer levels of narration' (p 40). This conception implies a hierarchical ordering of narrational instances in the text and, further, that the principle of articulation of these levels is the textually inscribed distance between the textually identified narrator and the point of view that provides the intelligibility of what is represented. Where these two aspects coincide, character subjectivity regulates access to the diegetic world and where they diverge, e.g., in third person narration, the text posits a narrational subjectivity that within its boundaries has no 'origin'. Such a subjectivity is termed 'omniscient' not solely on the grounds that it knows more than the characters can know, but because such a narrational instance is the process that delegates narrational instances to other levels from a position of effacement (p 43 and p 68 note 18). In the case of classical narration, the diegetic world, albeit illusionistic, functions as an 'objective' reference term which serves to discriminate objective and subjective events and states that are 'accessible to characters' from those that are not. Accordingly, the types of subjectivity are best characterised in terms of the relation to the diegesis: intra- or meta-diegetic narration that occurs within the level of the diegesis and extra-diegetic narration which is the effaced ground of diegetically embedded narrations (cf p 73). Subjectivity in the classical film can therefore be broadly categorised (and described by example) as falling between character-based narration (either literally in optical point of view or metaphorically in subjectively motivated shots and sequences, e.g., flashbacks, dream states, projections of mood, etc) and omniscient narration at the boundary of the text, and not an object of a 'telling'.²⁵

The intelligibility of narration in general and any particular narrative level rests, Branigan argues, on the capacity of the spectator to form spatial hypotheses about the point from which the scene is viewed – point of view indicating a subject position much like shifters in verbal language (p 4). The overriding emphasis on spatial relationships is also related to the fact – whether or not this is of 'an ontological order' – that the spatial properties of a picture have a relatively greater salience than temporal properties, since a picture is always taken from somewhere. Moreover, since 'time . . . exists in a text only as constructed by the text itself i.e. through narration', it follows that it is 'narration which ultimately constructs the time of the text' (p 64). Such a formulation, if taken literally, would seem to underrate the role of temporal continuity in film and in the case of the narrative text as a whole, various temporal markers in the diegetic world, e.g., period of setting, the historicity of objects. But since the coherence of the former depends on the narrative context and since the narrative context concerns the time of what is told and is inflected, as an object of telling, by the time of the telling, temporality resolves itself finally into the articulations of space around the 'vision' of the narrator. Thus the temporality of the diegetic world, even if 'objectively' in the past as in historical drama, can be rendered as the continuous present only if the level of narration (e.g., character narra-

tion) mobilises cinematic articulations of space such as optical point of view which indicate this tense (pp 64-65). Accordingly, 'we may define narration in the visual arts as a *positioning of the viewer with respect to a production of space*, and subjectivity as a *production of space attributed to a character*' (p 64).

Having demarcated subjectivity in general and subjectivity in particular, Branigan employs the latter as the basis of the detailed analysis; 'a specific instance or level of narration where the telling is *attributed to a character in the narrative and received by us as if we were in the situation of a character*' (p 73). Setting aside the extra-diegetic dimension of subjectivity – and hybrid variants such as voice-over commentary or the pseudo-diegetic²⁶ – means neglecting the question of the 'origin' of the narrative as a text in favour of those aspects of the viewer's activity which are directly pertinent to textual comprehension. (Obviously, the character-centred causality of the classical cinema is an important premise here.) Thus, it is indicative that when speaking of narrative, which is *not* the theoretical object of Branigan's analysis, Barthes' 'codical' analysis of *S/Z* provides the key exemplar (p 35). Obviously, given the tenor of my remarks as a whole, this is not an unwelcome connection. But attending to the effect of such separation as regards the 'reader' tends to reproduce the dichotomy between the reader as subject of textual comprehension and the reader as social subject or concrete individual. *Screen* has addressed this conflation in the past, so the issue here is whether or not the separation of the reading act and its implied subject from cultural and social determinations (signalled by the setting aside of narrative) is substantive rather than analytical.²⁷ Certainly suspending (temporarily or permanently?) the issue of reference, enables Branigan to delineate the way in which the articulation of narrational levels creates an illusionistic play within the text. In order for there to be a reference to the psychological space of the character it is necessary – in a manner reminiscent of MacCabe's notion of metalanguage, though with the advantage of specifying the variability of narration – for there to operate a higher level narration which is 'non-psychological' (p 182). Such a level in fact inscribes, though this is not Branigan's particular terminology, an 'imaginary' or specular circle of subjectivity:

There is a strange, almost circular relation here because a character in the story appears to be telling the story: that is narration and narrative are all bound together in character subjectivity so that each appear to guarantee the others' existence – and truth. Put another way, the text uses a series of spaces to represent character in order to re-present through character those same spaces. (p 177)

In the cases of the 'modern' text, both character and non-psychological levels of narration fail to cohere either in terms of their own efficacy or by the former being grounded by the latter (p 143 ff).

²⁶ An apparent metadiegetic narration which is in fact operated by the extradiegetic narrator. See David Alan Black, 'Genette and Film', *Wide Angle*, vol 8 nos 3-4, pp 22-23.

²⁷ See Paul Willemen, 'Notes on Subjectivity', *Screen* Spring 1979, vol 19 no 1, pp 41-69; and David Morley, 'Texts, Readers, Subjects' in Stuart Hall et al (eds), *Culture, Media and Language*, London, Hutchinson, 1980, pp 163-173.

²⁸ Edward Branigan, '“Here Is A Picture of No Revolver!” The Negation of Images, and Methods for Analyzing the Structure of Pictorial Statements', *Wide Angle*, vol 8 nos 3-4, pp 8-17.

The final discrete element in Branigan's analysis and its key objective is to 'give an account of the logic and procedures of our reading – how we come to understand not just a single text, but a range of texts and potential texts' (p 19). The emphasis on competence rests, like the notion of narrational codes, on a frankly acknowledged use of the Chomskyan paradigm in linguistics. The elements of classical representation, or more strictly the codes of classical narration, origin, vision, time, frame and mind which produce the object – the narrative – are the elements out of which the reader constructs what is specific to filmic narration in general and a given level of narration in particular (p 57). Thus, as Branigan subsequently points out, a minimal discursive or narrational statement in *Vertigo* would be composed of the following:

Scottie (point of origin) looks off (glance of vision) toward (temporal transition) a distant view (framed from his point in space) of what (objects) can be seen (through normal mental awareness).²⁸

The syntax of such a basic sentence – which is situated more emphatically in this subsequent article at the level of narrative function – is at the same time implicated in the force field of meanings generated by like sentences. Thus, the reading process can be defined as the generating of hypotheses of narrative space, with respect to its being personal or impersonal. Such hypotheses about the possible surface features of films – about denotation, in other words – are derived from underlying competence rules, but such rules do not determine the meaning placed on a particular 'performance' of cinematic space. Such connotations derive from community assumptions (p 18 and p 179). To this extent it is correct to see Branigan as going even further than Bordwell in producing a 'content'-free discussion of viewing and reading. It has to be said in Bordwell's favour that Branigan's theory gives him an easier time because he leaves so many interesting questions open – such as whether or not 'community assumptions' about the social importance of a given character affect the degree of causal importance attributed to his or her 'gaze', or how the material texture of the cinematic sign affects the divisions of the text.

In the ordering process, for Branigan, the reading strategy is paramount. A strategy of reading which rests on material divisions (subjective shot, camera, etc) incorporates an 'error' approach. It tends, on the one hand, to emphasise the extent to which a given level of narration (personal or impersonal) is tied to specific techniques, presuming an invariant relationship that transcends context – a point of view shot is always assumed to be personal. On the other hand, it asserts, on the discovery that, say, an optical point of view was in fact impersonal, that the reader's experience of 'error' marks a break with *histoire* to reveal the underlying presence of the author (pp 50-52). That this discussion matches Bordwell's discussion of enunciation and suture is clear enough. Branigan counterposes a 'reading hypothesis' theory that claims

that mismatched hypothesising about the personal or impersonal nature of cinematic space does not ensnare the spectator into an identificatory play, but represents merely a phase of his or her thinking about what is happening on screen. In such a situation errors in the assignment of a kind of subjectivity to cinematic space cause the spectator, firmly situated in the rational space of his or her own reading, to revise hypotheses. The prioritisation of conscious rationality in this depiction, as well as the presumption that consumption is a matter of conscious distance, is evident. But this raises the question of what Branigan would say about the reading processes of concrete spectators, since his claim is actually to offer a description of a *general competence* which is posed by a body of texts as a condition of their intelligibility (cf p 175 and p 211). The final twist in this line of argument, which paradoxically sees texts and concrete spectators as set firmly in the realm of ideology and discourse – ‘an ideology is not an image or an idea but a system of representation through which the individual encounters the material conditions of existence’ (p 145) – but excludes such factors from the ‘understanding’ of texts, is to redefine camera:

I will define camera not as a real, profilmic object (which leads to misunderstanding about the viewer's access to reality) but as a construct of the reader – a reading hypothesis which seeks to make intelligible the spaces of film. . . . the classic text, in particular, surrenders to that familiar reading competence (that coherence) which we name as the ‘camera’ – itself compounded of those six spatial effects we label as the dolly, track, crane, pan, tilt, and lateral tilt. (p 53)

While one must agree that many mistaken attributions of the structuring of narrative space have arisen from confusing, say, camera movement with lens manipulation or even editing, seeing ‘camera’ as a reading construct opens the door to conceiving of the consumption of film as purely a subjective event, removed from the materiality of the text. Branigan also suggests that ‘camera as an hypothesis’ must ‘ultimately’ rely on community assumptions like reading hypotheses in general (p 53). Such a view might have the consequence of rendering superfluous film studies, which, for better or worse, counterposes the specificity of cinematic representation to ideas about communication and culture in general.

VII.

The arguments in *Point of View* stand in support of those advanced in *Narration in the Fiction Film* – a factor evidenced by David Bordwell’s introduction to the former. Yet the accounts differ in the showing/telling distinction which Bordwell makes categorical and Branigan represents as two aspects of the same process, narration. Bordwell, in the light of

²⁹ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, p 32.

³⁰ Generally speaking, it must be said that both Branigan and Bordwell offer a 'readerly', in the Barthesian sense, rather than 'writerly' view of the reading process, despite qualifiers. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1974.

Branigan's implied criticism, offers a distinction between recounting and enactment, based on the implied temporal relationship between prior events currently told, but marked as past, and prior events presented as currently occurring ((p 78 and p 346). But this distinction does not actually replace the showing/telling distinction – his source, Seymour Chatman, actually treats the terms as synonymous²⁹ – and invites distinctions at the level of character action that the *fabula/syuzhet* contrast is ill-placed to address. Conversely, though Bordwell in the preface to *Point of View* does not actually indicate the nature of his reservations, the distinction between reading by error and hypothesis does not conform with Branigan's general argument since switches in levels of narration (from personal to impersonal) imply, like the notion of hypothesis itself, the possibility of errors. Again, while it may be an error to equate material divisions in the text with divisions in narration, the errors of 'subjectivity' attribution (character, or omniscient, or some combination of these) may be intrinsic as dramaturgical premises to some genres. Most of this – though not the last – Branigan agrees with (p 52). So either the 'error' readings he treats are bad readings – too dichotomous or too empirical – which is no cause to reject them in principle, or they presume a passive spectator, which is a good reason for dispensing with them.

Where both texts come together, significantly, is here – in the conception of the active reader. Like Bordwell, Branigan underestimates, or more exactly analytically sets aside, questions of the materiality of the text and narration and executes a parallel operation in terms of the reading process.³⁰ It is no surprise that an account of the logic of reading derived from Chomsky would have this effect, but it is by no means clear that a reading based on these terms escapes triviality at the cost of elegance. It might be argued that an account of a specific text is better conceived of as an instance of performance, in the linguistic sense, which relies on a more peculiarised notion of competence or grammar of use – involving not merely questions of genre, etc, but also a particular competence set up by the text itself. Even on Branigan's terms, this unaddressed possibility is signalled, since he is prepared to argue that each level of narration 'has no meaning in itself but acquires meaning through opposition or difference with other levels within the work or other works' (p 92).

This means that his notion of competence may not even adequately describe the effects of narration, let alone narrative. As with Bordwell, there is a tendency – which is made explicit in his binary division of theories of narration into rationalistic and empiricist accounts – to ignore a realist epistemology. This is brought out in his interesting discussion of alternative theories of narration, which can be seen as a polemic against a communication theory of narration. Apart from the observation that his theory of narration can readily show how such a theory is a product of textual mechanisms, it fails to engage with a discursive formation as a practice that conditions the collective consump-

tion of film and enters into the reading protocols of the 'lay' spectator. Such a lack is strange, indeed, given that the fundamental thrust of the Wisconsin project is to establish how readers accomplish the identification of the cinematic image, or 'a theory of the active *comprehension* of text and images in context', as a basic competence logically prior to hermeneutics.³¹

However, Edward Branigan has resited his approach to narration in a way that seems likely to satisfy some of my objections. First, as signalled in the preface to *Point of View*, his theory of classical narration has been developed to express functional relationships, in particular, a 'slot-filler' approach to discourse and so is well placed to reflect the *scripted* nature of on-screen behaviour.³² Secondly, Branigan has found it appropriate to relax his contention that narrational processes *never* rest on the material divisions of the text nor on the materiality of the text *per se*. Certain forms of narration are marked by reference to relationships of expression and exemplification.³³ In so far as both these modifications seem responsive to the condition of film as a scripted performance, they may begin to correct one of the major deficiencies in these accounts – a tendency, which is paradoxical given their close attention to the image track – to read cinema from a linguistic perspective.

VIII.

To conclude, I would like to address in a general way the theory of the spectator advanced in these texts. In the foregoing, I have touched on aspects of this theory that show that it is fundamentally at odds with other, notably psychoanalytical, accounts. Again, the pointing towards the culturally given materiality of the film image, its inherence as a scripted performance, has carried the implication that Bordwell's 'constructivist' account has failed to engage elements of an 'environmentalist' approach that may not be set aside by a mere citation of the appropriate (or inappropriate) authorities. Clearly, such matters require further attention and debate, which these texts should encourage and certainly deserve.

But if one assumes that the theory of the spectator offered by these authors is correct, does it follow that it will achieve the purpose the authors intend: to provide an account of cinematic consumption that affirms the autonomy of the spectator as an 'active' former of hypotheses, always, as it were, renegotiating the terms of his or her engagement? I think not: first, such a 'spectator' is a shadowy import from a context of critical expertise into a theory of spectatorship in general; secondly, the notion of the activist spectator is not in fact incompatible, barring the most *literal* application of such a theory, with the theory of interpellation. Such a theory, if understood correctly, has always implied that subjectivity is a process of subjection *and* qualification – that the subject gains a bounded autonomy, an imaginary coherence, within a discursive

³¹ See Trevor Pateman, 'How Is Understanding an Advertisement Possible?', in Howard Davies and Paul Walton (eds), *Language, Media and Image*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1983.

³² Edward Branigan, '“Here Is A Picture of No Revolver!”', *op cit.*

³³ Edward Branigan's, 'Diegesis and Authorship in Film', *Iris*, Fall, 1986. This reference was not available to me at time of writing and I rely on Branigan's comments in footnote 19, p 16, '“Here Is A Picture of No Revolver!”', *op cit.*

³⁴ e.g., Goran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, London, Verso, 1980. 'Interpellation' theory may be problematic, but this does not undercut the substantive point that the authors' notion of 'activity' may be in itself ideological.

³⁵ See Kristin

Thompson, *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, pp 22 ff and p 301. But then so would a 'writerly' approach to reading, which would undermine the notion of a correct reading.

³⁶ See Robert Lilienfeld, 'Systems Theory as Ideology', *Social Research*, vol 42 no 4, 1975.

³⁷ See Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgement to Calculation*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, pp 200 ff.

³⁸ See Tony Solomonides and Les Levidow, *Compulsive Technology*, London, Free Association Books, 1985, p 102. The comparison with information theory is not so far-fetched, given that Bordwell and Branigan, especially, use terminology and references within the field.

formation while inhabiting the space of generalised subordination³⁴. To put it bluntly, 'smart' readers of film may only have internalised the conditions of their subordination more efficiently. This possibility has its ironic counterpoint in the intellectual careers of the writers reviewed here, since a forceful argument for formalist analysis has always been that the perception of 'form' is a prophylactic against the seductions of 'content'³⁵. In these texts, it is possible to discern the principles of form emerging as an ideological formation *sui generis*.

Given the studied eclecticism of the Wisconsin project (see Bordwell p xi) and the nuancing within it, is it possible to offer a programmatic summary? This is hazardous, but for the sake of an ending, I would offer the catchphrase 'information theory goes to the cinema'. On the one hand, the various attempts to describe the operations of the classical paradigm rest on an implicit model of an open system. Such a system is marked by negative entropy and equifinality – its internal organisation and differentiation expand to absorb change and maintain its parameters and objectives in a state of equilibrium. The tendency of such a theory is to take 'systematicity' as axiomatic and to treat the analysis of empirically relevant events only in so far as they are system-integrative³⁶. It remains an undefended assumption that such a model can be applied to cultural analysis without entailing semantic reductionism³⁷. On the other hand, the depiction of the spectator as a 'package' of cognitive processes, signalled by Branigan's reliance on Chomsky, and the rendering of the reading act as an algorithm, set the conception of the spectator within the premises of information theory.³⁸ Once again, it is a virtually undefended assumption that 'grammatical man' is an appropriate rather than semantically (not to mention logocentrically, patriarchally) reductive treatment of the 'spectator'.

These and other matters require further address. But to conclude an appraisal in which I have sought to balance criticism with engaged critique, it is no mean accomplishment and an apt tribute to the long-term commitment of the writers to film theory, that, like it or not, they have produced an alternative paradigm to those that currently underpin pre-occupations on both sides of the Atlantic.

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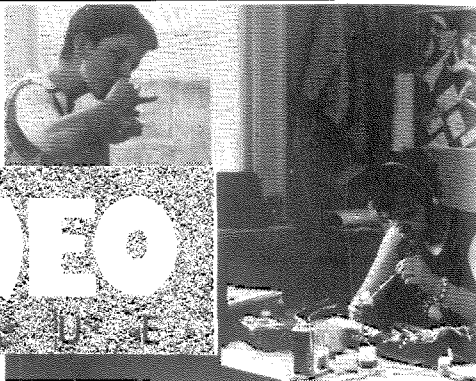
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THE SAME DIFFERENCE

BY ROBERT YOUNG

¹ Mandy Merck, 'Introduction - Difference and Its Discontents', *Screen* Winter 1987, vol 28 no 1, pp 2-9. Further references will be cited in the text.

² See *Sexual Difference*, *Oxford Literary Review*, vol 8 nos 1-2, 1986, and *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985.

SCREEN'S WINTER 1987 ISSUE is entitled 'Deconstructing "Difference"'. What would it mean to deconstruct 'difference'? Given, that is, that deconstruction charts the operation of something called *différance* - which is already defined as deconstructed difference. Why does *Screen* need to do it all over again?

We soon discover, however, that neither 'deconstructing' nor 'difference' are being used in a technical deconstructive sense. In 'Difference and Its Discontents', the introduction to the issue, Mandy Merck makes it clear that by 'difference' is meant 'the theory of sexual difference'.¹ The theory of sexual difference, she suggests, requires deconstruction, in the name of sameness.

But is there such a thing as 'the theory of sexual difference'?

Apparently so, for the complaint against 'the theory of sexual difference' is precisely that it is a homogenous theory. But, paradoxically, what is wrong with this homogeneous theory is that it always promotes heterogeneity. It neglects sameness in its desire for otherness: otherness always defined as 'the same difference' of heterosexuality.

Merck argues that what she calls 'the "difference" school' is 'largely unable to theorise homosexuality' (p 6). As proof she cites the lack of lesbian representation in the *Oxford Literary Review*'s 'Sexual Difference' conference, and the absence of homosexuality altogether in the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*.² While there is no doubt that homosexuality was under-represented in both cases, it does not necessarily follow that this was the result of a deficiency in theory. For it is not so much that the so-called difference school has been unable to theorise homosexuality as that its theorisation of homosexuality has produced certain theoretical problems. These in turn produce difficulties at the level of political strategy. However, Merck's own

arguments demonstrate that such problems cannot be solved by attacking difference as such.

For difference has already been deconstructed³, even if such deconstruction has been no less under-represented in the pages of *Screen* for the last twenty years than homosexuality itself. The awkward dilemma that arises is that in the first instance at least 'deconstructing "difference"' actually makes the representation of homosexuality more problematical. It is not necessarily a question of homosexuality being repressed but rather that difference theory makes categories such as homosexuality, no less than heterosexuality or bisexuality, more difficult to sustain. That was the reason why the *Oxford Literary Review's* conference was called simply *Sexual Difference*. The point was that the instability or seeming dissolution of the terms through which sexual politics operate poses a political problem. It would be fair to add that this difficulty was not in the event adequately addressed by the conference, and more often simply produced expressions of anxiety, or even, disturbingly, of homophobia.

In this context it seems extraordinary that *Screen* still finds it necessary in 1987 to present a theoretical critique of sexual difference theory as a 'typology of dualism' (p 5). Has *Screen*, perhaps, had to revive it because a certain theorisation of homosexuality needs such a hypostatisation for its own self-definition, even if that self-definition presents itself in antithesis to it? Merck suggests that this curious theoretical time-warp is the result of the influence of Mulvey's 1975 essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' – despite the fact that many, including Mulvey herself, have since argued that it assumes too rigid a dualism of sexual division.⁴ Of course it is possible to read both Freud and Lacan as implying a binary opposition masculine/feminine in a theory of sexuality organised around the terms phallus/castration. But, as Merck acknowledges, such a reading has also been disputed throughout the whole history of psychoanalysis, and especially since the '70s by critiques which either offer revisions of Freud and Lacan (Irigaray, Cixous, Montrelay, Heath, Kristeva) or re-readings of them so as to show the instability of such oppositions in their texts (Derrida, Rose).⁵

Merck goes on to suggest that despite the many critiques of sexuality as a binary opposition, from the perspective of lesbian and gay politics sexual difference still looks as if it is 'conceived within a dualism' (p 5). But does homosexuality in fact make trouble for 'the surprisingly stable opposites of "difference"' (p 9) as she claims? It is impossible to answer this question without asking another: what are the 'opposites of "difference"'? Does difference in fact have opposites at all – or are there only differences in difference? Here we encounter the real problem in Merck's argument, in as much as it repeats the very assumptions that she denounces: she complains that difference theory always presupposes the same difference (heterosexuality), but she in turn assumes difference theory to be always the same: 'the theory of sexual difference', 'sexual difference theory', 'difference theorists', 'the "difference" school', are

³ On January 27, 1968, to be precise. See Jacques Derrida, 'Difference'; in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp 129-60, also, in a slightly modified form, in *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp 1-27.

⁴ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 6-18. The critiques of Mulvey's article are discussed by Merck, op cit, pp 4-5.

⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985; Hélène Cixous, *The New Born Woman*, University of Minnesota, 1986; Michèle Montrelay, *L'Ombre et le nom: Sur la féminité*, Paris, Minuit, 1977; Stephen Heath, 'Difference', *Screen* Autumn 1978, vol 19, no 3, pp 51-112; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982; Jacques Derrida, 'The Purveyor of Truth', *Yale French Studies*, vol 52, 1975, pp 31-113; Jacqueline Rose, 'Introduction II' to Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne, *Feminine Sexuality*, London, Macmillan, 1982, pp 27-57.

all lumped together as one unchanging theory, one undifferentiated 'school'. This is, apparently, because from the perspective of gay and lesbian politics all difference theory seems to be predicated on a psychoanalytic account of difference that assumes a stable and untroubled masculine/feminine opposition. However not all difference theory is psychoanalytic – deconstruction, for instance.

In many areas of what Merck describes as 'difference theory' a distinction is made between differences and opposites. This is because such theories are predicated on Saussure's account of difference which denied that individual words possess intrinsic meaning, arguing instead that they only take on meaning by being distinguishable from other words: 'in language there are only differences *without positive terms*', or, as Derrida puts it: 'difference inscribes itself without any decidable poles, without any independent, irreversible terms'.⁶

Although Merck follows Dugald Williamson in his Foucauldian critique of Lacan's stress on the function of language in psychoanalysis⁷, the rigid opposition masculine/feminine that she seeks to trouble can only be disturbed by showing that these terms are not in fact the positive terms of sexual identity. Lacan recognised that Freud's emphasis on the interchangeability of positionality in sexual fantasy shows that sexual difference operates in exactly the same way as linguistic difference: there are not just two poles masculine/feminine but an undecidable set of terms through which the subject circulates. As D N Rodowick points out in his analysis of 'A Child is being Beaten', the subject takes up multiple positions of identification, whether successively or simultaneously, 'in which transactions between the masculine and feminine positions are both variable and necessary', and beyond even that where:

*The very question of desire seems to require the transgression of the positionalities defined as 'masculine' and 'feminine' by constructing a sedimentary structure in which variable positions of identification and places of enunciation are overlaid.*⁸

Thus sexuality, as both Freud and Lacan have argued, is not fixed but rather extremely mobile at the level of fantasy and only restricted or stabilised at all through social and cultural pressure with respect to object choice. But if there is no untroubled dualism of heterosexuality in psychoanalytic theory, the corollary follows that this also has to mean that there is no untroubled homosexuality either, indeed that there is no 'pure', stable or intrinsic homosexuality any more than there is 'pure', stable or intrinsic heterosexuality. No more than an unwavering masculine/feminine binary, there is no undisturbed heterosexual/homosexual binary.

Such a theory of undecidability means that, like language or the psyche itself, sexuality does not work by the rational logic of non-contradiction in which an entity cannot both be A and not A at the same time, a point which has escaped Williamson in his critique of Lacan. He demonstrates

⁶ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, London, Fontana, 1974, p 120; Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p 210.

⁷ Dugald Williamson, 'Language and Sexual Difference', *Screen* Winter 1987, vol 28 no 1, pp 10-25. Further references will be cited in the text.

⁸ D N Rodowick, 'The Difficulty of Difference', *Wide Angle*, vol 5 no 1, pp 11, 13.

that the Lacanian theory of the Imaginary and Symbolic 'conflates two discontinuous ideas of difference' (p 18) and claims that this contradiction represents a major problem for Lacanian psychoanalysis. It certainly would if psychoanalysis operated, as Williamson does, according to the formal protocols of rational logic. Not using psychoanalytic concepts himself, Williamson forgets that the crucial innovation of psychoanalysis is that it offers a theory of unresolved conflict.

For Lacan, as for Freud, the psyche is constituted by antagonistic forces. There are no negatives or contradictions in the unconscious: the subject has to live its incompatible differences simultaneously, and that is why there is never accession to a full, self-present consciousness, nor, for that matter, assumption of a stable sexual identity. Subjectivity really is constituted by discontinuous differences: that is the whole problem – not for Lacanian psychoanalysis but for the psyche, and for us. The fact that according to Freud and Lacan the psyche operates according to the same structures as linguistic difference – double, contradictory, and undecidable – is either a measure of the primary role that language plays in psychic life or, as Derrida argues, demonstrates that the psyche itself is already an effect of linguistic difference. If the connection between subjectivity, language and sexuality were severed, however, as Williamson suggests it should be, then there would be no option but to return to the realm of a rational logic of non-contradiction and thus of fixed polarities in which difference means opposition – in which case there would be no incompatibility, no unconscious, no gap between representation and biology and nothing but an essentialist sexuality of a male/female dualism.

Merck's suspicion of the linguistic account of difference means that she finds it impossible to get out of the structure of the very oppositions which she criticises. She suggests that the heterosexual binary of masculine/feminine needs to be deconstructed – but it is open to question whether this so-called 'deconstruction' is likely to meet with any more success when all that happens is that Merck puts another binary, heterosexual/homosexual, in its place. Why challenge a binary opposition because it is restricted within a typology of dualism if you are only going to substitute another? Nor does Merck's 'deconstruction' of difference in the name of a sameness defined in opposition to otherness give any more promise of escaping the topology of binarisms.

For same and other, identity and difference, homosexuality and heterosexuality, homogeneity and heterogeneity, all are conceptual categories that work in the same way as the male/female dualism. It is true that culturally and politically the opposition will work as a hierarchy in which one term will be valorised over the other. But the simple reversal of this hierarchy only remains within its terms and does not challenge it – in fact it only perpetuates it. It is for this reason that Derrida makes the at first startling suggestion that 'phallocentrism and homosexuality can go, so to speak, hand in hand'.⁹ If binary oppositions in effect depend on and reinforce each other then phallocentrism may indeed be a homo-

⁹ Jacques Derrida and
Christie V McDonald,
'Choreographies',
Diacritics, vol 12 no 2,
1982, p 72.

sexual enterprise, both determined by and organised around the having or not having of the phallus. 'No genitally similar object can be legitimately eroticised' (p 6). Merck complains, clearly not too keen to advocate constructions of sexuality 'without pre-given "content"' (p 3).

But this contradiction, in which on the one hand she shows an inclination towards a theory of sexuality predicated on a biological genitality (whether it be the same or different) while on the other hand she criticises sexual difference theory for being too rigid in its dualisms suggests that a more interesting argument is being broached: sexual difference theory is too different but at the same time there are not enough differences. It is this apparent contradiction that unsettles the binary structure that Merck wishes to shift, both overturning it and at the same time displacing it.

This becomes clearest in the paragraph in which we are told that the counter-assertion to 'the same difference' of heterosexuality in the *Sexual Difference* conference and the *Difference: On Sexuality and Representation* exhibition took the form of an article and an exhibition both entitled – 'The Same Difference' (p 6). Is this second 'same difference' supposed to be the same difference or a different same difference to the first? Apparently it is impossible to tell: the 'same difference' is the term both of a complaint against heterosexuality and also the characterisation of what is being advocated against it. Merck writes that it 'can be read to criticise the hypostatisation of heterosexual difference in contemporary theory or [my emphasis] to claim an equivalent ratio of difference, and desire, for homosexuality' (p 6). It wants a difference, but then it also wants an equivalent difference (the same difference?). So 'the same difference' is not necessarily always 'the same old same' difference (p 9), even if it is the same difference. But if that is the case is it still the same difference – or is it really different?

Alternatively, perhaps the same differences really are the same, that is, the same difference of heterosexuality is the same as the same difference of homosexuality. But how can heterosexuality, that is sexuality for the other, be the same as homosexuality, sexuality for the same? Can the other be the same or the same be the other? They certainly need each other: after all, the same cannot be the same on its own, it has to be defined against the other in order to be the same. It is only the other that makes the same the same. But then the same cannot be the same except by being the other for the other, while, on the other hand, 'the other cannot be the other – of the same – except by being the same (as itself)'.¹⁰ In order to be the same, the same must also be other; it must differ from itself.

If this suggests a problem for sameness at least Merck allows for a different option: it might be possible to revive Monique Plaza's attempt to separate sexual difference from identity. Identity is beset with the same problems as sameness, in that it cannot be thought except as differing from the different, and therefore difference is what enables identity to be itself.¹¹ But Plaza's attempt to separate sexual difference from such

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p 128.

¹¹ Mandy Merck, *op cit*, p 7, citing Monique Plaza, "Phallomorphic Power" and the Psychology of "Woman", *Ideology and Consciousness*, no 4, 1978, pp 4-36. For a succinct account of the complexities involved in the concepts of identity and difference, see Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp 36-39.

labyrinths does not succeed in evading them: she suggests that by detaching the hierarchy of male/not-male from the self/other distinction then woman could become “other *than* not-male” rather than “other *and* not male” (p 7). However, as the terms themselves indicate, this revision does not manage to avoid either the male/not-male or the self/other categories as such. What Plaza’s argument suggests instead is a certain internal differentiation in the notion of the other, which can be either – and therefore both – not male and other than not-male. The other therefore differs from itself: just as for Merck’s ‘the same difference’. Perhaps it is not altogether by chance that both arguments end up by repeating nothing less than the structure of the unconscious itself; in Samuel Weber’s description:

*If the unconscious means anything whatsoever, it is that the relation between self and others, inner and outer, cannot be grasped as an interval between polar opposites but rather as an irreducible dislocation of the subject in which the other inhabits the self as its condition of possibility.*¹²

In view of this insistent logic of an internal difference in all attempts to define sexuality in terms of sameness or otherness it is intriguing that Merck approvingly cites Aimee Rankin’s criticism that ‘difference theory’ ‘displays more deference than difference’ (p 9) – for the deconstruction of difference involves almost exactly that. In Derrida’s words:

The verb ‘to differ’ [différer] seems to differ from itself. On the one hand it indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility; on the other, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a spacing and temporalizing that puts off until ‘later’ what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible. Sometimes the different and sometimes the deferred correspond [in French] to the verb ‘to differ.’ This correlation, however, is not simply one between act and object, cause and effect, or primordial and secondary.

*In the one case ‘to differ’ signifies nonidentity; in the other case it signifies the order of the same. . . . We provisionally give the name **différance** to this sameness which is not identical: by the silent writing of its **a**, it has the desired advantage of referring to differing, both as spacing/temporalizing and as the movement that structures every dissociation.*¹³

‘*Différance* is the name for the spatio-temporal differed-and-deferred economy of this sameness which is not identical’¹⁴, the very structure that Merck’s own argument has led to. Derrida names it *différance* in order to bring attention to the way in which difference differs from itself: heard, *différence/différance* sound the same, but when written they are different from each other and no longer identical. *Différance* does not offer an alternative to the conceptuality of binary oppositions (for that would itself form another binary opposition) but instead both enables and confounds them:

¹² Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp 32-3.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, op cit, pp 129-30.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, op cit, p 9.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p 17.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, op cit, p 212.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, op cit, p 18.

*The same, precisely, is **différance** (with an **a**) as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to another. Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the **différance** of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same.*¹⁵

Différance thus describes the operating conditions of the strange logic of binary oppositions in which they always exceed themselves, in which opposite terms will always be defined as different from each other, but by that very token as also the same: 'it is an operation that *both* sows confusion *between* opposites and stands *between* the opposites "at once"'.¹⁶ The economy of *différance*, in short, produces the effects of undecidable difference between same and other, identity and difference, and all other binary oppositions that we have been charting.

As Derrida demonstrates, exactly the same structure can be found at work in the texts of Freud. At this point we may recall Freud's curious habit of making distinctions based on a male/female polarity that he then seems to disavow. Inevitably this has led to hotly contested arguments about whether Freud or Lacan's work is implicated in biologism or patriarchy or is set against them, and the argument could go on for ever as long as each side claims one kind of statement as Freud's authentic position – which can then be promptly denied by an appropriate citation supporting the other view. But to read Freud as either promulgating a fixed opposition, or attempting to redeem him by showing how elsewhere he disowns it is to miss the point. His texts argue both, simultaneously:

*All the oppositions that furrow Freudian thought relate each of his concepts one to another as moments of a detour in the economy of **différance**. One is but the other different and deferred, one differing and deferring the other. One is the other in **différance**, one is the **différance** of the other. This is why every apparently rigorous and irreducible **opposition** (for example the opposition of the secondary to primary) comes to be qualified, at one moment or another, as a 'theoretical fiction'.¹⁷*

Such a contradiction remains unthinkable according to the normal protocols of logic, but it is precisely the moves of such procedures that deconstruction, and indeed psychoanalysis, trace.

This structure may also account for the curious necessity remarked upon earlier for Merck to rerun the critique of sexuality as a dualism: the deconstruction of such an argument shows how it is constructed by means of certain ambivalent forms of inclusions and exclusions which have the effect of making it rely upon elements that it can neither fully assimilate nor control. For homosexuality to define itself it must begin by differentiating itself from what it is not, even though this means that it will never entirely succeed in separating itself from it: each term of the

opposition appears as the *différance* of the other. In Weber's description this process enacts

*a movement of conflictual decomposition and recomposition in which that which is posited sets itself apart: that is, both demarcates itself from an other to which it is opposed; and de-marks itself by prescribing yet another, third term, which inexorably replaces and displaces the other two.*¹⁸

This is the story of how sameness, in opposing itself to difference, becomes 'the same difference'.

From this perspective homosexuality can scarcely be regarded as a disavowal of difference, as Merck claims (pp 5-6), for 'the same, precisely, is *différance*': heterosexuality and homosexuality are distinguished as the same, but different, difference, each the supplementary double of the other. Homosexuality's cultural repression is perhaps a marker of just how close that difference is.¹⁹ This account of the constitution of sexuality poses a political problem, however, for it seems to stand in antithesis to the general oppositional and self-defining strategies of gay politics. Yet the political problem is also that culturally and institutionally homosexuality and heterosexuality are marked as, simply, different. At this point gay politics comes up against the same difficulty as that of feminism, with which Merck concludes:

*in some cases the objectives of feminist politics go against sexual differences, in other cases they do not, and the problem is to find out which is which.*²⁰

The trick, however, is not to get caught within the binary terms of an either/or choice, of a bewildered 'which is which?'. The political strategy must be to assert sexual difference while simultaneously, paradoxically, showing that difference to be the same.

¹⁸ Samuel Weber, op cit, p 31.

¹⁹ cf Jonathan Dollimore, 'Homophobia and Sexual Difference', *Sexual Difference, Oxford Literary Review*, vol 8 nos 1-2, p 5.

²⁰ Mandy Merck, op cit, p 9, citing Parveen Adams in 'm/f: Interview 1984', *m/f*, nos 11-12, 1986, p 14.

METAPHOR IN SEXUAL DIFFERENCE THEORY: A NOTE OF CAUTION

BY JOHN O THOMPSON

1. Reading the articles by Dugald Williamson, Donald Greig and Jackie Stacey in the recent *Screen* issue on Difference¹, I suddenly had a strong sense of their having something in common besides their subject-matter, the application of 'sexual difference theory'² to filmic textual analysis. I want to try to pin that something down, because I suspect that a certain misdirection of energy is going on: the theory may not be open to development in quite the way the articles assume.

I don't need to summarise the articles, but it will be recalled that Williamson takes Lacan as his starting-point, Greig takes Bellour, and Stacey takes Mulvey (with a pinch of Bellour). Let me begin by quoting a few passages, points where I see the articles (like many others these days, as Mandy Merck's lucid survey of the field reminds us³) as making broadly the same move. I will try to characterise that move afterwards.

From Williamson: 'This model tends to reduce diverse representational practices to the single mechanism of psychoanalytic subject-formation through misrecognition. . . . [T]he totalising categories of subject and linguistic structure used . . . can clearly be disaggregated into various historical constructions of the person (including the sexual person and definitions of gender), techniques of individualisation, organisations of conduct, modes of language-training and so on.'⁴

From Greig: 'The symbolic as employed by Bellour and others may well describe the most

likely resultant structure for the male child ("given a certain regime of fiction, and a certain order of civilization"), but the text must maintain its potential for the transgression of such systems, must be seen as dynamic structuration. . . . Work on fantasy has allied itself with this approach in its stress upon the interchangeability of roles, for spectator and character, *across* the terms of sexual difference – the possibility for the spectator, ultimately, of positions, rather than the one (male) subject position that the text seems to favour. This is to assert not only multiple entries into the text, but also multiple identities within the text.'⁵

From Stacey: 'The spectator is presumed [by Bellour] to be an already fully constituted subject and is fixed by the text to a predetermined gender identification. There is no space for subjectivity

¹ Dugald Williamson, 'Language and Sexual Difference', *Screen* Winter 1987, vol 28 no 1, pp 10-25; Donald Greig, 'The Sexual Differentiation of the Hitchcock Text', *ibid* pp 28-46; Jackie Stacey, 'Desperately Seeking Difference', *ibid* pp 48-61.

² This term for it, which I take from Mandy Merck's issue introduction (see next note), is usefully neutral between the psychoanalytic and the feminist components in various theoretical mixes.

³ Mandy Merck, 'Difference and its Discontents', *Screen* Winter 1987, vol 28 no 1, pp 2-9.

⁴ Dugald Williamson, *op cit*, pp 23, 24.

⁵ Donald Greig, *op cit*, pp 37, 29.

to be seen as a process in which identification and object choice may be shifting, contradictory or precarious. . . . [An] insistence upon a gendered dualism of sexual desire maps homosexuality onto an assumed antithesis of masculinity and femininity. . . . The limitations of a dichotomy which offers only two significant categories for understanding the complex interplay of gender, sexual aim and object choice, is clearly demonstrated here. . . . The rigid distinction between *either* desire or identification, so characteristic of psychoanalytic film theory, fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both processes.’⁶

Each of these passages makes a plea for more variety and mobility in the theoretical position which is under development. Just what is deemed overly static or essentialist differs in each case, as does the manner in which movement is to be restored to the account, but always the problem is that an insight has threatened somehow to solidify into a reductive treatment.

2. Such passages as these play a particular role in unfolding a pattern of argument, always involving an earlier theoretical text. Here is a rather crude three-stage sketch of that pattern.

Stage One: Phenomenon X functions under the domination of an oppressive order. Therefore, an account of that order should give us an explanatory account of X. (Reciprocally, such an account will enrich our understanding of the oppressive order in question.)

In the cases with which we are concerned at the moment, X can be either the filmic text or the spectator (which anyway are to some extent co-determining), and the oppressive order is that of patriarchy. So a theory of patriarchy is required which would allow the text-in-patriarchy and/or the spectator-in-patriarchy to be understood. Whoever provides such a theory, or applies such a theory initially to X, is the author of the Stage One theoretical text, the one that is felt to be (to use a word that in this context does seem a bit loaded) ‘seminal’.

Stage Two: X has not been accounted for. But somehow the account seems to tie X and the oppressive order together *too* tightly. Surely there’s more to X than that; surely the oppressive order is not all that omnipotently determinant – or at least not that simple! And yet the Stage One

treatment, as far as it goes, seems persuasive: it genuinely illuminates X, so just walking away from it isn’t an option. There follows a period of scratching the head and furrowing the brow.

Stage Three: We must, then, move forward. What is plainly needed is a *further development* of the Stage One account, one which retains its initial insights but takes into consideration how much more mobile, unstable, contradictory, open to change, fluid, ambivalent, etc, X and/or the oppressive order turn out to be than had been recognised initially.

Williamson, Greig and Stacey are all, in these terms, engaged in offering Stage Three accounts. The passages I’ve quoted are points in the articles signalling that it’s time to move forward, out of a Stage Two dubiety which succeeded a Stage One enthusiasm, into a more nuanced, fluid, nearly-adequate treatment (while leaving, of course, ‘more work to be done’, as their own articles ideally become starting points for refinements to be delivered by future Stage Three-Plus contributions . . .).

3. What gives Stage One arguments their power to convince in their first place? The answer which a Stage Three strategy implies is: *their approximate truth*. That is, there are facts about spectators and texts which the Stage One account gives us. But other facts seem not to be compatible with that account (Stage Two). So the account must be extended and revised (Stage Three).

But is sexual difference theory, when applied to textual analysis, a domain of fact?

The problem with *not* taking Stage One accounts to be ‘true in fact’ is that this would seem to weaken them crucially. What if talk of ‘position(s) for the spectator’ or ‘construction of the subject’ were to be acknowledged as metaphorical? The pressure would then be on to replace such expressions with plain, literal equivalents, to speak ‘properly’ of these matters rather than figuratively.

It is here that current reassessments of metaphor and of the whole figurative/literal divide could turn out to be useful. For a start, a

⁶ Jackie Stacey, *op cit*, pp 50, 53, 59, 61.

94 reading of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* can be recommended⁷. The importance of Lakoff and Johnson lies in how they show there to be an interweaving of literal and metaphorical in the most everyday, down-to-earth sorts of language. Literal expressions turn out to be structured by metaphorical concepts. It is normal, rather than exceptional, for one domain of experience to be understood by means of terms derived from another. Especially is this so if the domain to be structured is in some way more inchoate than the domain which is called upon to 'donate' structure.

Of course, sexual difference theory is not generally expressed in wholly everyday language. But a Lakoff-and-Johnson-type treatment of its characteristic tropes could still be revealing – especially as its un-everydayness is at least in part determined by a felt need to replace the usual metaphors in this domain with others. (It aims to become a 'common sense', by displacing the current, compromised version.⁸)

Lakoff and Johnson show with great panache that metaphorical understanding is not invalid or dispensable. But it is partial. One of Lakoff and Johnson's most quoted examples is the one with which they begin their book, the metaphor 'argument is war', which can be shown to underlie many of the ways in which we talk about personal and intellectual disagreements. It would be the wrong move, they argue, having acknowledged this to be a metaphor, to try to eliminate it, to attempt to restrict ourselves to some sort of 'proper vocabulary' for argument-description. What does need to be recognised, though, is that aspects of argument are concealed by the underlying metaphor at the same time as others are revealed:

In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept (e.g., the battling aspects of arguing), a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor. For example, in the midst of a heated argument, when we are intent on attacking our opponent's position and defending our own, we may lose sight of the cooperative aspects of arguing. Someone who is arguing with you can be viewed as giving you his time, a valuable commodity, in an effort at mutual understanding. But when we are

*preoccupied with the battle aspects, we often lose sight of the cooperative aspects.*⁹

For Lakoff and Johnson, a good metaphor has real cognitive force: thinking of X in terms of Y is an enlightening rather than a decorative or obscurantist activity. But at a certain point, the power of a particular metaphor to illuminate runs out. ('It is important to see that . . . metaphorical structuring . . . is partial, not total. If it were total, one concept would actually be the other, not merely be understood in terms of it.'¹⁰)

That point will depend as much on one's purposes as on a matter of 'fact'. And the appropriate thing to do at that point is to assess the nature and degree of conceptual non-overlap, possibly with the help of an alternative metaphorisation, rather than to throw up one's hands and deny that there ever was any overlap. Equally inappropriate, however, may be what a Stage Three argument attempts: to treat the original metaphor as something that can be developed, corrected, or diluted so that X and Y eventually come to coincide perfectly.

4. I don't intend on this occasion to develop in any detail an analysis of sexual difference theory's characteristic metaphors. (Though I can indicate some words that would repay working on in the few sentences I've quoted above from the Difference articles: from Williamson, *mechanism*, *subject-formation*, *construction*, *techniques*; from Greig, *structure*, *dynamic structuration*, *roles*, *position(s)*, *entries*; from Stacey, *constituted*,

⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980. For an attempt to use Lakoff and Johnson's insights in literary textual analysis, see Ann Thompson and John O Thompson, *Shakespeare, Meaning and Metaphor*, Brighton, Harvester, 1987, ch 1.

⁸ Or it may be aiming to become science. One's optimism or pessimism as to this prospect leaves undiminished the interest of exploring a theory's metaphors, though science does seem to transcend or naturalise its metaphors rather differently from other discourses. There are some interesting essays on metaphor in science in David S Miall (ed), *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, Brighton, Harvester, 1982.

⁹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, op cit, p 10.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p 13.

*fixed . . . to, space, shifting, interplay, construction.*¹¹⁾

The suggestion I'm working towards is this: Stage Three 'rectifications' of Stage One work may involve a misunderstanding of the true nature of Stage Two puzzlement. Stage Two is actually a point at which we notice that the powerful and illuminating restructuring of our conceptual field regarding texts and audiences achieved via psychoanalytic concepts (themselves of course complicatedly metaphorical), or other concepts developed to 'think patriarchy', is only a partial structuring. It is not a point at which it is really a question of new facts about films, television programmes, ourselves as viewers, or the empirical audience in the Odeon 1 Liverpool or NFT 2 London putting pressure on the theory to evolve. To the extent that a particular metaphorical account of viewing doesn't square with what you've just watched, with your sense of the response patterns of others, or with your sexuality, the remedy is to look for a new metaphor, not to treat the metaphor as *corrigible*. For to correct it may be to kill it.

Let me illustrate briefly what I mean by turning to a dichotomy which Jackie Stacey retrieves from Laura Mulvey's archetypal Stage One article¹² as 'two contradictory processes: the first involves objectification of the image and the second identification with it'.¹³

An unproductive thing to do with this distinction, I would argue, is to treat it as a way of sorting spectators, as though there were 'viewing groups' like blood groups: over here the objectifiers, over there the identifiers. Equally misguided would be any confident division of filmic texts into two groups, the object-presenting ones and the identification-soliciting ones. Rather, the distinction's power lies in its ability to lend structure to parts of one's viewing experience which are crucial if one is trying to think that experience through in 'gender mode'.

That experience is 'all over the place' enough for us to welcome such a loan from an intelligently-organised psychoanalytic-feminist synthesis. As Lakoff and Johnson put it, 'we typically . . . conceptualize the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated'.¹⁴ What had been an unordered field ranging from glamour to weepiness prior to a reading of Mulvey becomes a polarised field:

even if ambivalence replaces sheer confusion, delineation has arrived! But it has arrived in only one of many possible forms, and the inchoateness of the viewing experience leaves a remainder even after maximal colonisation by the structuring. ('Are either of these modes helpful as I try to articulate the impact upon me of Margaret Sullivan? Or Brid Brennan in *Anne Devlin*? Or . . . ?')

Craning the head around in a particular cinema on a particular day, or being with particular friends half-watching their TV casually, one is struck by the sheer variety of people there are and of the strategies they can mount, faced by a text. This variety really does seem greater than that of blood-groups, or even of socioeconomic positions; patently it is greater than that of genders, even if one agrees that there are more than two of these. To accord Mulvey's dichotomy classic Stage One status may be to argue that any of these particular people, given access to it (and brave enough not to be frightened by it), would find it enlighteningly structuring aspects of their viewing experience which had been unstructured, or reactionarily structured, before. But each person would use the dichotomy differently. And therein lies its real power – situationally rather than 'objectively' grounded.

If this is so, critics seeking to move forward from any such powerful theoretical gambit need to consider carefully whether the appropriate response/extension to it lies in treating it as a thesis to be defended (and modified to make more defensible) or in acknowledging it as a trope, revealing much (some of which could do with further unfolding), while concealing much (which partiality the deployment of alternative metaphors might be the best way of critiquing).

My own hunch is that, yes, definiteness of

¹¹ Antony Easthope, in 'Liberal and Theoretical Discourse: An Opposition Assessed', *Social Praxis*, vol 6, 1979, pp 217-35, offers a shrewd analysis of some metaphorical patterns in 'theory' as represented by the late-'70s journal *Ideology and Consciousness*.

¹² Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 6-18.

¹³ Jackie Stacey, *op cit*, p 49.

¹⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *op cit*, p 59.

96 meanings and of positions-with-regard-to-meanings is at times attainable in our field (there really is a Rick in *Casablanca*, and we really are supposed to like him), but that the interesting, puzzling areas of response, of cultural and individual achievement and pathology, lie

beyond that. This 'beyond' is powerfully addressed by (the right) Stage One theories – to a point. The trouble with Stage Three elaborations is that they do not do what they claim to do, take us further forward from that point. In their well-meaning way, they simply muffle the address.

camera obscura/15



Yvona Adams, *Alien Stream*, performance (November 1983)

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THE SCENE OF ACTION IS DIFFERENT

KEITH READER CONSIDERS
GILLES DELEUZE'S 'CINEMA'

The first volume of Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema – The Movement-Image* appeared in its English translation last year¹; its companion, *The Time-Image*, is to be published in English shortly. Volume 1 is described on the dust jacket as 'a major work in philosophy and a radically new understanding in the theory of cinema', which (due allowance made for such hype) is close enough to the truth. Why then should it be that I felt a twinge of apprehension – even embarrassment – as I opened it?

One reason is certainly Deleuze's 'nine-days-wonder' status in the British perception of French intellectual life, founded upon the meteoric rise and fall of the *Anti-Oedipus* he wrote with Félix Guattari². This text, seething with libidinal pulsations and undoing the presuppositions of Grand Theory at every turn, might have been appropriated as a 'post-modernist' work; its stances and vocabulary have a certain amount in common with the Lyotard of *Économie Libidinale*. But *Anti-Oedipus* still bears the brunt of having been a key text for many of the (formerly) notorious new philosophers, who rose and fell with even more dizzying speed in 1976 and 1977. Such figures as Bernard-Henri Lévy, Christian Jambet, and Guy Lardreau triumphantly produced a warmed-over version of Camusian humanism, larded with decontextualised Foucauldian, Lacanian, and Deleuzian terminology, as the *dernier cri* refutation of Marxism and all its works. The opportunistic shoddiness of the whole enterprise very rapidly became visible, and it was read back

over the success of *Anti-Oedipus* in such a way as to produce a virtual guilt-by-association.

British readers are also likely to recognise, in Deleuze and Guattari's romanticisation of the schizophrenic condition, echoes of another 'bygone' intellectual current – the anti-psychiatry of R D Laing and David Cooper, now seen as unfashionably redolent of joss-sticks and broken on the Lacanian wheel to boot. These conjunctures go some way towards explaining why Deleuze can easily be regarded as yesterday's man.

Yet both before and after *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze produced a number of important philosophical works, as well as writing on Sacher-Masoch, Proust and Kafka. And it is here that we find the second, and more substantial, reason for the reaction I have just described. Deleuze's philosophical problematic is radically different to that of almost any other modern French thinker, and *a fortiori* to that of any other cinematic theoretician (so far as I am aware) in any language. It draws upon a 'vitalist' reading of Nietzsche and above all the work of Henri Bergson, the major conceptual pre-text for

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema: The Movement-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, London, Athlone Press, 1986. (Page references will be indicated in parenthesis after *MI*.)

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, London, Athlone Press, 1984.

Cinema. Bergson's work is likely to be relatively little known to readers of *Screen*, and *Cinema* to be a difficult work to assess in consequence.

Bergson's notions of *élan vital* and intuition-in-duration strike a discordant note to those of us weaned upon seemingly more rigorous concepts, and it is significant that he was one of Lacan's *bêtes noires*. The culture-shock produced by *Cinema* is thus a profound and important one. As Freud said of dreams, 'the scene of action . . . is different'³. 'Scene of action' here translates the German '*Schauplatz*' – a theatrical stage, but literally a 'watching- or gazing-place' – and there is no doubt that Deleuze gazes from a place very different to that learned by most of us over the years.

Continuing to Freudianise the hapless Deleuze against his will, we might say that gazing from a certain place is likely to connote a certain return of the repressed, and that in *Cinema* this most strikingly takes the form of an incorrigible auteurism. The pantheon – from Ophüls to Visconti, from Ozu to Resnais – is put on parade with no apparent recognition of possible theoretical objections. Nor does the viewer's positioning (in any sense) receive sustained interrogation. Considerations of sociology and gender are blithely evicted. For Deleuze is an essentialist, albeit a dynamic one, and from this two important conclusions flow. The first is that he believes that the cinema (in a comparatively old-fashioned sense) *exists*, as shown by the following passage, which apart from the absence of moral strictures would not have been out of place in the early work of Robin Wood:

it may be that the cinema had to go through a slow evolution before attaining self-consciousness. . . . The images of the neurotic man or woman become the visions of the director, who advances and reflects through the phantasms of his hero. Is this the reason why modern cinema has such need of neurotic characters: to sustain the free indirect discourse, or the 'low language' of the present-day world? (MI, pp 74-75)

'Unsound' this may be, but elsewhere in the two volumes this very begging of questions makes a host of insights and analyses available. This is largely because of the second conclusion (for Deleuze rather a premise), which is that the 'eternal present' of the cinematic image so dear to

a Christian Metz is a major error. For Deleuze, as the titles of his two volumes make clear, movement and time are fundamental to cinema, rather than being illusions produced by it, and thus segment-by-segment analyses rob their object of its most essential quality, as it were, before they have even begun. There is nothing particularly startling about this if we draw an analogy with recent work in/on literature; the work of such as Derrida and de Man has reinstated the kinetic/dynamic dimension of writing as 'positive absence', so that it is no longer possible to produce formalist analyses à la Todorov or Genette as before. And Deleuze's conclusion to *The Time-Image* is eminently consonant with the post-structuralist reinscription of philosophy and writing into each other:

*So there is always a moment . . . where the question to be asked is not 'what is cinema?', but 'what is philosophy?'*⁴

However, recent hiatuses in film theory, and the tendency for a journal such as *Screen* to switch its attention to questions of audience and sociology, as well as to other visual media, have combined to delay the emergence of similar trends in writing on film. This further helps to account for the disorientating impact of Deleuze's work.

Resolutely unstructuralist Deleuze may be, but *The Movement-Image* in particular presents one characteristic familiar from bygone days: the deployment of a conceptual apparatus of which individual works and texts then appear as illustrations, or mere epigones. Bergsonian theses on movement form the basis for a typology of movement-images, also influenced by the heterodox semiotics of Charles Sanders Pierce. The six types are defined in the glossary as perception-image ('the thing' – point-of-view shots and the filming of 'natural' objects will serve as examples); affection-image ('quality or

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, vol 4, Pelican Freud Library, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986, p 112.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema: The Time-Image*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1986, p 366. (All translations from this edition by Keith Reader. Further page references will be indicated in parenthesis after *TI*.)

100 power', as in Expressionist or Dreyeresque close-ups); action-image ('the force or act' – this is where unsurprisingly the Hollywood cinema makes its major appearance); image at transformation ('reflection' – Soviet dialectical montage, Kurosawa, Mizoguchi); and finally mental image ('relation' – a cinema that builds the – hypostatised – spectator's relation to the film into its text). Godard is a major figure cited here, as is Hitchcock, described as:

... one who no longer conceives of the constitution of a film as a function of two terms – the director and the film to be made – but as a function of three: the director, the film and the public which must come into the film. (MI, p 202)

The allocation of directors and films to one or the other category is generally, though not invariably, a hard and fast one, which is what evokes the early structuralist schemas of classification. I was most irresistibly reminded of these by Deleuze's contrast between the two types of action-image:

The large form – SAS' – moved from the situation to the action, which modified the situation. But there is another form, which, on the contrary, moves from the action to the situation, towards a new action: ASA'. This time it is the action which discloses the situation, a fragment or an aspect of the situation, which triggers off a new action. (MI, p 160)

However, to rest at this would be to sedentarise and distort Deleuze's thesis much as he accuses certain theorists of distorting the essence of cinema. Movement from one type of image to another is after all possible, and this is because the various kinds of image so to speak sublate (*aufheben*) themselves into one another, though Deleuze draws here not so much on Hegel as on Pierce:

Pierce insists on the following point: if firstness is 'one' by itself, secondness two, and thirdness three, it is necessary that, in the two, the first term should 'recapitulate' (reprenne) firstness in its own way, while the second affirms secondness. And, in the three, there will be a representative of firstness, one of secondness, the third affirming thirdness. There is therefore not merely 1, 2, 3, but 1, 2 in 2 and 1, 2, 3 in 3. (MI, p 198)

The difficult question here is how history is at work, and what kind. When Deleuze writes of the times and industries in which 'the great crisis of the action-image took place', he invokes relatively straightforward historical and political criteria (the success of the Italian industry in surviving Fascism, the continuance of resistance underlying oppression) (*MI*, p 211). However, he then goes on to say:

The Italians were therefore able to have an intuitive consciousness of the new image in the course of being born. This explains nothing of the genius of Rossellini's first films. (MI, p 212)

Neither 'intuition' (for all its importance in Bergson's epistemology) nor 'genius' are terms with which most readers of *Screen* are likely to feel comfortable, and I admit to being worried here by the summary drafting-in and equally summary dismissal of history. Deleuze frequently writes as though the temporal flow of cinema mysteriously engendered its own immanent history, as the Image (my capital) spirals through its avatars to its final rendezvous with philosophy.

Yet, as hinted earlier, one consequence of the remoteness of Deleuze's conceptual framework is that the analyses of individual texts seem not forced into that framework, but sufficiently distant from it for the films discussed to be taken on their own terms. The unjustly neglected work of Jean Grémillon is politically reinstated through the assertion that 'few directors have filmed man's work so well, even discovering in it the equivalent of a sea: even the avalanches of stones like waves' (*MI*, pp 78-79). The Pascalian dialectics of choice in Bresson are luminously delineated (*MI*, pp 114-115), and the view of Hitchcock as instigator of the 'mental image' mercifully means that 'there is no need to decide between those who see him as a profound thinker, and those who see him merely as a great entertainer' (*MI*, p 202). Deleuze's immanent view of time and history works very well across the texts of individual films or directors, having no need to negotiate a space for itself alongside more linear approaches.

The full force of this becomes plain in *The Time-Image*, which opens onto 'time as the fourth dimension' (*TI*, p 56). To ask where in the (two-



L'Année dernière à Marienbad: inviting a 'Deleuzian' reading.

dimensional masquerading as three) cinematic image the fourth dimension may be found is literally meaningless so long as one is hampered by the idea of the eternal cinematic present ('ruinous for any understanding of the cinema') (*TI*, p 57), and by its corollary, the notion of time as punctual or sequential. If (like Bergson, like Proust) one sees the past as *also* 'the most general form of an already-there, a general pre-existence' (*TI*, p 130), it becomes easier to understand why for Deleuze the cinema is the most privileged form of time-machine.

This sparks off an analysis of *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* that is for me the most memorable part of the entire work. The main difficulties in dealing with this film have always seemed to me to be, on the one hand, the manifest absurdity of attempts to impose a 'real' order of events upon it, and on the other the solipsistic feebleness of assertions that 'all it is really about is the "eternal present" of the cinema'. It thus came as a considerable relief to be set free from this

imprisoning duality by Deleuze's reading:

... the three characters correspond to three different presents, but in such a way as to 'complicate' the inexplicable rather than illuminating it, to bring it into being rather than getting rid of it: what X lives in a past-present, A lives in a future-present, and this difference secretes or assumes a present-present (the third character, the husband), all caught up one in another (TI, p 135)

Equally interesting, and again paradoxically benefiting from Deleuze's unreconstructed auteurism, is the view that the man X corresponds to Resnais's temporal architecture and the woman A to Robbe-Grillet's notion of 'layers or regions of the past' (*TI*, p 137).

L'Année dernière à Marienbad obviously invites a 'Deleuzian' reading through its constant challenge to punctual and sequential notions of time. *The Time-Image's* treatment of more overtly historical texts is characterised in the first instance by an absence of linear history. Renoir's

films of the 1930s are read (in common with but differentially from the work of Ophüls, Fellini and Visconti) as instances of 'crystalline time', which resides in 'the indivisible unity of a real image and "its" virtual or potential image' (TI, p 105). The specificity of this for Renoir lies in the way in which – beyond the frozenness of the crystal where the actual and the potential, or the real and the imagined/recollected, endlessly confront each other – there is an opening onto the idea of the future. Thus:

When Sartre criticised Welles (and Citizen Kane) for reconstructing time on the basis of the past, instead of understanding it in a future dimension, he perhaps did not realise that the film-maker closest to his heart was Renoir. It was Renoir who was acutely aware of the identity between freedom and the future, collective or individual, with a leap towards the future, an opening onto the future. This was Renoir's very political consciousness, his way of conceiving of the French Revolution or the Popular Front. (TI, p 117)

Unkind critics might remark that, if this was the sum of Renoir's political commitment, it was hardly surprising that it survived the 1930s only in its most attenuated form. . . . What the text returns us to here is not so much the 'political' or the 'ideological' in any of their uses as a kind of phenomenological intuition of the *auteur's* political nature, more akin to Geneva School literary criticism than to what most of us would recognise as politics.

Much the same can be said of the treatment of sound/image dislocation in Straub/Huillet and Marguerite Duras (a good late '70s *Screen* title if ever there was one). The contrast is readily perceptible:

For the Straubs [sic!], the class struggle is the relation that continually circulates between the two incommensurable images, visual and auditory. . . . which is why they can put their work forward as fundamentally Marxist, even taking into account the bastard or the exile. . . . But, in her distance from Marxism, Marguerite Duras is not satisfied with characters who are traitors to their own class, she calls upon the classless, the beggar-woman and the lepers, the vice-consul and the child, commercial travellers and cats, to make of them a 'class of violence'. (TI, p 338)

Rainbow coalitions I have seen, but Duras's beats them all! Again, direct apprehension of a political

sensibility clearly appears possible and important to Deleuze. This may not matter *per se*, but it seems odd that the gender divide is not perceived as fundamental to Duras's political aesthetics, and arguable that it does none of the film-makers any service to place the rigours of Straub/Huillet dialectics on a similar footing to Duras in her 'Oriental mode'.

If I have concentrated on the political implications of Deleuze's work more than its space in the text might appear to warrant, this is because that has seemed to me to be its most problematic area. Beyond aesthetics and politics, however – and the preposition can and must be understood in both a spatial and a temporal sense – what Deleuze's text insistently returns us to is philosophy, and its specificity lies above all there. Any theoretical discourse is necessarily inhabited by the philosophical, but I know of no other where it so boldly takes up residence in the front room. What, finally, of the work's possible uses? It is almost certainly too daunting for any conceivable undergraduate course, and difficult (if only because of its remarkable breadth of allusion) for most postgraduates. The fact that it is so piquantly tangential to other cinematic theories is likely at once to enhance and to limit its impact. A 'Deleuzian reading' would be instantly recognisable as such, and for that very reason it seems unlikely that we are about to witness a burgeoning of them. Yet theoretical developments can surely not fail to take into account the significance of Deleuze's reinscription of temporality across every element of a film, if only as an important indication of how film theory has lagged behind its literary counterparts in recent years. The specificity of cinema – which *Screen* in its theoretical heyday was often accused of neglecting – finds here an impressively documented formulation which it will not prove possible to ignore.

Thus it is that the 'different scene of action' constructed by Deleuze may feed back into and change the other scenes of action – the vantage-points, the gazing-places – that we have witnessed, or perhaps even performed upon, over the years. How feminist theory in particular will engage with it (if at all given Deleuze's seeming blindness to questions of gender) is a question impossible to answer, but one which nevertheless poses itself irresistibly to me as I complete this review.

Radical
PHILOSOPHY
Issue No. 45

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RECONSIDERING POPULAR CULTURE

BY ALAN O'SHEA AND BILL SCHWARZ

Not so long ago the issue was relatively straightforward. Popular culture was what people did when they weren't working. You either liked it or despised it, thought it a good or a bad thing – the 'you' of course referring to the cultural critics, most of whom conceded it was all a bit of a nightmare. To the conservative upholders of Culture it was trivial, mean and hollow, like the lives of those who embraced it; the only remedy lay in purgative doses of Conrad or Lawrence. To most Marxists or socialists it served to lull the masses into somnolence and had to be displaced by a fresh-faced political consciousness – rambling and the Collected Works. Well times do change. If as an index we can rely on the enthusiasm shown in higher-education-corridor-chitchat for reconstructions of soapcultures – though still perhaps a bit selfconscious, the tiniest bit outré – it would appear that the current generation of academicians is now eager to recover the pleasures of popular culture which their formal education taught them to reject. A lot has happened in between these two moments. Theoretically there were always the tricky problems of who exactly were the people and what constituted their culture, and a host of other difficulties followed. Throughout the '70s, strategic methodological advance was the order of the day. A determined generation of conquistadors hacked through the theoretical thickets and climbed the highest conceptual points where the air was bracing and the oxygen sparse. All kinds of rarefied ideas ensued, releasing a heady mixture of the banal and the outrageous, the exciting and the incomprehensible. Now, by and large, the grand theoretical systems lie in ruins, suspicion if not

incredulity toward metanarrative predominates, imperious fantasies of theoretical omnipotence have given way to more modest, open, introspective and subjective explorations. In deconstructing the popular it loses its fixed subject: the idea of the unitary people – hero or villain – disappears forever.

This will to deconstruct has been all to the good. Abandoning the quest for a singular theory or subject of the popular has created a much greater potential for imaginative, less conceptually inhibited engagement which works *with* popular forms, valuing the subjective dimension and undermining the externality between critic and object. Evidence of this shift has been particularly clear from recent work orientated in autobiography, subjective histories, popular memory – the best of which has been extraordinarily powerful, collapsing boundaries between fictive and academic writing, even on occasion producing books which, one might say, are a pleasure to read. In general, despite the theoretical licence for a large helping of relativism, this deconstructionist urge has stopped well short of an anarchoid, Lyotardian exultation in the imminent obliteration of Western culture, in which the ephemeral contemporaneity of popular narratives provides the only alternative to the totalitarian tyranny of metanarrative – in which, in other words, the externality of the critic is transcended in one leap by identifying the source for true knowledge in the schlock and kitsch of popular cultures.

All to the good, perhaps, but if this degree of circumspection is maintained, if there really does exist a reluctance to consign all to a mind-bending vortex in which signifiers ceaselessly

play with one another in a perpetual but arbitrary and ultimately meaningless cabaret, then a number of the old familiar problems remain. More specifically the idea of popular culture – of a subordinate culture in a structured relation to a dominant culture – in its very definition remains necessarily contiguous to concepts of social totality. Yet this is precisely what deconstructionist strategies have effectively overturned. At this point, then, it could well make sense to declare a loss of interest in the whole issue, get on with discrete studies of particular instances and not worry too much about the more general problems posed by an overall idea of popular culture.

Alternatively, it may still be worthwhile to attempt to establish some coherence within the field(s) of popular cultural relations, establish some general principles by which to think how different popular identities connect, and maintain some contingent idea of the organisation of popular cultural forms ‘from above’. Two studies have recently appeared, each of which retains a general notion of popular culture (as even their titles confirm) but which at the same time – to different degrees – revise the inherited model of popular culture as the subordinate moment in a social totality defined by class relations.

Popular Culture and Social Relations, edited by Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott, comes from the team involved in the Popular Culture course at the Open University, with which readers of *Screen* and its erstwhile sister magazine will be familiar.¹ Due to force of circumstance culminating in the termination of the course, this volume appears – sadly – as a retrospective of work completed, as if the authors had drafted their own collective *festschrift* before closing up shop and, in the case of the editors, quitting Milton Keynes for the call of more exotic locales. This isn’t the place to pay tribute to the now defunct OU Popular Culture team, but as recognition from other quarters probably won’t be forthcoming we can perhaps legitimately slip in here a word of admiration.

In structure, and in many of the case studies, the book follows the pattern of the course from which it evolved. New work appears on the formation of a sexually differentiated culture in the early nineteenth century, but even so the range of current work on sexuality and sexual

difference remains poorly represented. The lack of attention to subordinate black cultures is surprising although this may simply indicate how swiftly things have moved since the OU Popular Culture team first assembled. It might also suggest, however, that were these perspectives to be integrated further modification, or transformation, of the class model would necessarily follow. However in retrospect the most striking feature of the original OU work is what now looks to have been its overly rationalistic ambition, a fact which registered both in the theoretical project itself and in its pedagogic effects. This was notable in a variety of forms – the dedication to an integrated and totalising theory, the attempts to conceptualise, in a hard, immediate sense, the relations between a particular popular form and the social totality – and it was manifest too, at a different level, in the great tracts of hypostatised theory with which students had to contend. In these terms the course was a recognisable product of the predominant approaches of the time. Students found the work heavy going – often far removed from their own experiences of popular culture – and the perspectives encouraged were often overly scholastic. In the current volume these scholastic and rationalistic imperatives have to a very large degree lessened.

An overarching model of Marx-through-Gramsci remains in place, not now so much as a taut rationalistic grid, but much more as a perspective in which a variety of positions can flourish. Of course, there are now sufficient versions of Gramsci to stock a fair-sized megastore, and some of these turn out to be more certifiably eccentric than others. The OU version, if we can call it that, is distinctive but not eccentric. As Tony Bennett explains, the contributors to the current collection appropriated Gramsci to overcome the debilitating polarity in which popular culture is understood either as generated spontaneously – from below – creating an authentic people’s culture which is, simply, resistance (the culturalist fallacy) or as culture imposed – from above – with such force and totality that the

¹ Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (eds), *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1986.

people, incorporated and supine, are deprived of all agency (the structuralist fallacy). This procedure is spelt out in an opening chapter which takes for its title 'The turn to Gramsci'. It is as about as open and deconstructionist a Gramsci as one could expect, a post-'68 Gramsci reconstituted (and indeed deconstituted) along that curious byway of cultural theory which leads from Saussure and Barthes via Volosinov to the Mouffe/Laclau positions of a decade or so ago.

In such a reading the structuralist tendency dominates over the culturalist, and in a number of the book's analyses the proposed relation of negotiation between the two isn't as well sustained as one might have hoped. Conversely, where this is fully grasped, fascinating work emerges. Thus for example in his account of Blackpool, Tony Bennett – having developed into an aficionado of the cardiac dangers of the city's white-knuckle rides – delivers an insightful essay which lifts itself entirely from earlier textual scholasticism. This is true, too, of Colin Mercer's contributions in which he explores the text-reader relationship and – in a provocative and intelligent piece – the categories of performance, entertainment and pleasure. His chapters indicate the extent to which the OU authors have been able to move beyond the resumé of theoretical positions – the initial business of defining the field, the measured process of constructing positions from other people's theories – and think creatively and independently for themselves. The initial stages of this theoretical construction were necessarily lengthy and arduous, and this was the moment when the OU work was most prominent. This moment of construction has now passed. From it, we can be sure, will come much work of real interest and significance.

Yet for the critics even this is too tightly organised within a theoretical system, wedded to the concept of totality – in sum, overly Gramscian. While the OU are still 'turning' to Gramsci, others have been turning away from him with some determination. And what, they might well ask, has Gramsci to offer? He had no liking for the Americanised popular culture of his own day, for all the originality of his cultural investigations he was never the slightest bit interested in its modern manifestations like the cinema and radio, he systematically subordinated

self to politics, had nothing interesting to say on the symbolic forms of popular cultures or their elements of fantasy, wrote incomprehensibly on psychoanalysis, suffered nervous collapses if subjected for too long to the speediness of city life, and so on: a grizzled old Bolshevik, about as far removed from the dynamics of contemporary popular cultures as one could possibly imagine. And indeed the challenge to Gramsci can broaden into an attack on the institutionalisation of knowledge and its intellectual and social effects. These theories of popular culture, critics could argue, weave together increasingly clever ideas, which circulate freely through the channels of the academic world and possess a life quite separate from that which they describe and analyse. It is this externality (so the critics could continue) which condemns even the best theory of this type to a redundant academicism, where Gramsci induces myopia, while the rest of the world – unseen to the cyclopean eye of the academic observer – is in the process of migrating to different galaxies where new existences are slowly unravelling.

These critiques of Gramsci, of totality, and of academisation draw most readily today from various strands of poststructuralism. One current example of how these critiques can cohere can be found in Iain Chambers' *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience*², which carries with it a flavour of Benjamin (aphoristic montage in place of super-rationalistic explanation) and Breton ('The street is the only valid field of experience'). But the interest of the book, in this context, is that it still holds to the idea of popular culture as a definable 'space' within the social system: the metaphors shift, but what is to be theorised remains recognisably the same.

The book opens in a style identifiably postmodernist. 'Let us begin with some public signs; with that urban alphabet where a contemporary sense is expressed' (p 3). A number of visual images, their relationships and intertextuality, are discussed. Chambers rejects cultural authenticity in favour of 'the anonymous

² Iain Chambers, *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience*, London, Methuen, 1986. Page citations are included in parentheses in the text.

flux of consumerism'. The mods, he writes, 'rendered consumption into a precise and imaginative conquest of their circumstances' (p 8). He contrasts a *bricolage* of popular signs, in which we can all claim expertise, to 'the official culture, preserved in art galleries, museums, and university courses' which 'demands cultivated tastes and a formally imparted knowledge' (p 12). He borrows, as he puts it, 'from Benjamin the strategy of writing through quotations' (p 12). Empirical instances of popular culture 'do not so much "verify" what I have to say as refer back to themselves; evocations, not explanations, of what passes through the channels of popular culture' (p 13). And he concludes the introduction by elaborating this theoretical strategy, voicing precisely the suspicion of what we might broadly call an academic Gramscianism: 'To attempt to explain these references fully would be to pull them back under the contemplative stare, adopting the authority of the academic mind that seeks to explain an experience that is rarely personal. The vanity of such a presumed knowledge runs against the grain of the popular epistemology I have tried to suggest: an informal knowledge of the everyday, based on the sensory, the immediate, the pleasurable and the concrete. Popular culture, through its social exercise of forms, taste and activities flexibly tuned to the present, rejects the narrow access to the cerebral world of official culture' (p 13).

But as so often stated intentions can be deceptive. What follows are in fact three good but orthodox empirical narrative histories (in the old sense) of particular popular forms: the city, film and TV, and music. Indeed the switch from the introduction to the first case study is achieved by use of that trope familiar in the nineteenth and twentieth century literature of exploration, the view from the train, echoing one of the most famous (but probably imagined) train-rides of all, described by Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* ('The train bore me away, through the monstrous scenery of slag-heaps . . .').

There is no point, here, in taking issue with the substantive histories. They are short, each describes the period from the 1880s and not surprisingly there is plenty of room for contention. The one on the city is the most original but also the one most wayward in terms of the conventional protocols of historical

explanation. The one on music, as we would expect from Iain Chambers, is the most informed and authoritative. The strength of the cumulative interpretation is not so much that it produces a new map of popular formations as it provides a more detailed picture than hitherto, with the boundaries redrawn and extended.

More generally we could ask why these particular case studies were chosen. And there is the very large question of all those excluded from this model of popular culture – people who are no longer (or not yet) youthful, many of whom, for long phases of their lives, are systematically excluded from any consumption bar the minimum to survive, or for whom the city represents not a potential for the Americanised dream of a zapped-out exhilaration but a repetitious urban nightmare. Such a slippage might have been checked if he had considered more carefully who are the people whose culture he is exploring.

However, there is something more surprising. The purpose of the introduction, as we read it, was to indicate the need to overcome the problem of an academicised and external view of popular culture – although the extent of the break with inherited methodologies and the convergence with poststructuralism are left open. Yet in the empirical case studies the familiar problems recur. Virtually no popular voices are heard 'speaking for themselves', nor is there any attempt to deal with the question of audience and reception as constitutive elements in the dynamic of popular forms, in their production and consumption. A striking indication of these difficulties lies in the choice of visual illustration: we see adverts and film and publicity stills, but there are few hints as to how these might be read by popular audiences. In short, the externality is as strong here as in any more conventional study.

But in a curious loop the conclusion to the book takes us back to the positions advanced at the start. 'If you live in a black-and-white world, and prefer the security of an abstract utopia to the potential of the present, then contemporary popular culture merely seems to be the predictable product of capitalism and consumerism . . .' (p 190). It is, he continues, the transformation within popular culture itself which renders redundant any distinction between low and high culture, and which in turn

inaugurates a new potential for the democratisation of culture: 'culture no longer appeals to a superior truth' (p 199), the hard logocentrism of metanarrative jettisoned once and for all.

This conceptual argument is pursued explicitly but it's not always easy to follow. Social totality, unitary subjects and the rest are out, but it is not entirely clear what composes the alternative, more indeterminate and relativist methodology. There is brief referencing to Gramsci, Lacan and Foucault. His conclusion is this: 'If ideology is all around us . . . then we can no longer measure resistance and the struggle for change along the yardstick of a non-ideological reality. . . . We need to disrupt the presumed coherence of ideology, texts and images. . . . That means living inside the signs. . . . the previous totality of sense offered by ideology (including Marxism) is "deconstructed", and its elements relocated in a more detailed, more complex, more specific and more open (i.e. transforming and transformable) perspective' (p 212). And as Chambers himself perceptively recognises this paradoxically brings us all the way back to the hermeneutics of Hoggart's concern with 'dense and concrete' cultural analysis.

The move beyond conventional Marxism is unambiguously formulated; the allegiance to a postmodernism is more hazy despite style and tone. It seems as if Iain Chambers appropriates for himself the insights of poststructuralism in order to deconstruct and break with Marxism and other totalising theories, while reluctant to ally himself with the current crop of postmodernist cultural theorists (or at least with Baudrillard); but there is a wobble here, really leaving the text open-ended, and tantalisingly so. It is a wobble which exists in the structure of the book, oscillating between the conventional, descriptive accounts of the emergence of particular popular forms and the deconstructing tendencies of the introduction and conclusion. Right to the end he hedges his bets.

It seems to us that we are left with the big problems but with no big answers. At this point the image of Orwell recurs. He – the figure could be almost any explorer of popular culture of the past hundred years or so – sits in his train, comfortably warm and insulated from the culture he watches, spying the young woman stick in

hand and bent double cleaning out the drain; the image remains a dispiriting evocation of the privileges of a particular social class and the powers conferred upon its members to observe and publicly define, without themselves being objectified so powerfully by others. The image, and the text within which it appears, is consciously self-reflexive, with Orwell at pains to uncover the concrete social relations from which he himself writes. But this careful, self-critical sub-text collapses before the book is through: it transpires that it isn't Orwell – now in the process of transmogrifying into the no-nonsense, plain-speaking pragmatist – who is caught up in all this after all, but *others*. The Orwell of the end of the book nimbly extricates himself from the complex of social relations so vividly and concretely described in the early chapters and escapes scot-free, at loose to summon any number of half-baked abstractions and castigate the deluded, pistachio-shirted intellectuals all around him.

The purpose of introducing this battered old motif at this point is simply as a reminder of how recalcitrant the old problems are: even when the externality of rationalism and scholasticism are grasped their transcendence, even in the most modest terms, is not easily achieved – or so we must conclude from a reading of Iain Chambers' appropriation of an alluring postmodernism. In its pure form this can only propose one solution to the study of popular culture: the liquidation of all critical and intellectual work, all teaching and writing, into a popular epistemology. And indeed the paradox is that when Chambers describes an unspecified part of the population living a monochrome life, or others an intellectual lie, unable to see with the eyes of the youthful avant-garde which lives its life, supposedly, in the streets, he in fact operates with a rather heavy-handed metanarrative, and one which may not be so universalising in its scope and democratic in its objectives as may first appear. By aligning himself with the avant-garde and the colourful, with the flow of the street, he can make it appear as if all the problems of knowledge and pedagogy lie with others in this bi-polar world: the monochrome guardians of official culture. *This* is where deconstructionism tips into liquidationism and simply rediscovers old and inflated abstractions. Moreover in a curious convergence,

this polarising view of the world, its forceful if thinly disguised metanarrative, enables him to perform a similar trick to Orwell's, appearing to absolve himself from his own positions: only this time he champions the pistachio-shirts.

Problems of externality are still with us. In the study of popular culture the will to deconstruct can rearrange some of the questions, can limit imperiousness, but – *pace* Chambers – does precious little to resolve the basic issues. At present we perhaps possess indications of how the experiential and lived might adequately be read and historicised – approaches which do indeed call for the 'contemplative stare' of other, non-popular discourses – but which do not flatten, dislocate or rationalise out of existence expressions of lived cultures. We are not faced with the choice between two planetary discourses – the one academic, totalising and external, the other lived and popular – but with the problem of how such discourses might more fruitfully, and more justly, be integrated. And this returns us to

Gramsci. The problems posed by Chambers – popular culture as a field of social relations, the centrality of popular epistemologies, the relationship between accredited intellectuals and popular forms – are clearly those of Gramsci. And if ultimately it proves unsatisfactory to liquidate all these problems into some notional popular epistemology, then it may be necessary – wizened, miserable old Bolshevik that he was – to go back to Gramsci, to read him anew, to imagine or invent a Gramsci for our own bleak times. 'The popular element "feels" but does not always know or understand', he wrote, elaborating an idea which is often treated anxiously, sceptically or with horror in current times. But no doubt many more would concur with the rest of the observation: 'the intellectual element "knows" but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel. . . . The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned.'

STELLAR STUDIES

SIMON WATNEY REVIEWS
'HEAVENLY BODIES'



Bus Stop: the woman-as-spectacle – or the man?

How anything in society is made, how making is organised and understood, is inseparable from how we think people are, how they function, what their relation to making is. The complex ways in which we produce and reproduce the world in technologically developed societies involves the ways in which we separate ourselves into public and private persons, producing and consuming persons and so on, and the ways in which we as people negotiate and cope with those divisions. Stars are about all of that, and are one of the most significant ways we have for making sense of it all. That is why they matter to us, and why they are worth thinking about.¹

Thus Richard Dyer established the framework for his study of *Heavenly Bodies*, and while it is never made clear quite how the Hollywood star system might help us elucidate the finer points of labour relations, or their popular perception, it is the sociological implications of stardom which catch his attention throughout. It is of course salutary to think of Hollywood first and foremost

¹ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, London, BFI/Macmillan, 1987, p 2. Subsequent page references are given in the text.

as an industrial conglomerate, but somehow Dyer's book never follows through this early promise of thinking of the star's body as a sign of labour, rather than simply its product. On the production of stars he has much to say, and much that is carefully researched and considered.

Dyer examines the personae of Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson and Judy Garland – taking the first two very much in their contemporary settings. Robeson's career is thus considered in the light of the question 'how did the period permit black stardom?', and Monroe in terms of the 'woman-as-spectacle'. Given his primarily economic and sociological predisposition it is hardly surprising that the section on Robeson is much the stronger of the two:

Through slavery and imperialism, black people have been the social group most clearly identified by and exploited for their bodily labour. Blacks thus became the most vivid reminders of the human body as labour in a society busily denying it. Representations of blacks then function as the site of remembering and denying the inescapability of the body in the economy. (pp 138-139)

The missing term here, of course, is *disavowal*, and Dyer's reluctance to employ the vocabulary of psychoanalysis becomes something of a self-denying ordinance in the course of his book. Discussing two nude 'art' photographs of Robeson taken by Nicholas Murray in the 1920s he is unable to address the question of how desire for Robeson is displaced across the barrier of racial difference into the ancient rhetoric of heroic labour. Robeson could be black and 'classical', but he could not be consciously accepted as black and sexy. Something of this same problem afflicts his reading of the career of Marilyn Monroe, whom he characteristically imagines in *Bus Stop* as 'helpless before the male drive to conquer'. His general adoption of a rather old-hat radical feminist alignment to film criticism leads him curiously to overlook the much greater difficulty of how the film struggles to establish the figure of the *man-as-spectacle*. Indeed, in the entire history of post-war cinema there can be few more radically over-determined names than that of Beau Regard! One of the many aspects of *Bus Stop*'s importance lies precisely in its troubling of any identification which would restrict our understanding of the

process of victimisation to the female role. It is the damage which ensues from any 'drive to conquer' which *Bus Stop* is concerned with, whether its subject is male or female.

Nor has Dyer very much to say about Monroe's skills as an actor, which is only to note his apparent lack of interest in what Andrew Britton has described as the 'counter-textual' possibilities of performance². *Heavenly Bodies* has a tendency to slide uncomfortably between discussions of the 'real' Monroe, her public persona, and the individual roles which she played. Yet such distinctions would have helped rather than hindered his intention to establish what she may have meant to her audiences in the '50s. His attachment to notions of 'sensibility', which are contrasted to 'semiotic criticism' (p 155), leads him ultimately to collude with a posthumous victimisation of Monroe much more unpleasant than anything we find in her individual roles or her overall persona as a star – namely the refusal to acknowledge her as a complex yet unmistakable sign of the affirmation of sexuality in a profoundly puritanical period of Anglo-American film culture.

In the third, and to my mind the most successful section of the book, Dyer moves on to consider the work of Judy Garland from the very specific viewpoint of her gay male audience. The strength of his readings of Monroe and Robeson lies in his attention to their extra-cinematic careers, even if, as I have suggested, he can't quite fold this material back into his analysis of the meanings of their film roles. He has particularly interesting things to say about the tensions, within Garland's girl-next-door roles, between her ostensible typicality as a suburban American of the forties and her actual nonconformity with this type. Her later films, like her songs, speak of 'desire for men and of relationships with men going wrong. Male singers could not (still largely do not) sing of such things. Gay men gravitated to women singers because they did sing of them . . .' (pp 155-156). I am less happy, however, with his depiction of

² See Andrew Britton, *Katharine Hepburn: The Thirties and After*, Tyneside Cinema Publications, 1984. Also Simon Watney, 'Katharine Hepburn and the Cinema of Chastisement', *Screen* September-October 1985, vol 26 no 5, pp 52-62.

Garland as some kind of androgynous archetype, since there is surely never any doubt whatsoever concerning her actual femaleness. Again, Dyer's reluctance to engage with longstanding debates in film theory concerning questions of *excess* in performance, or the disclosure through performance of ideological projects at the level of plot which the star's own persona undermines, makes his book seem rather old-fashioned, if not wilfully eccentric. In this respect he seems to be his own worst enemy, since his aim to show how subcultures are obliged to make sense of their position in the world by employing the raw materials of dominant culture is both radical and exemplary. As he observes in the closing paragraph:

There is nothing arbitrary about the gay reading of Garland; it is a product of the way homosexuality is socially constructed, without and within the gay subculture itself. It does not tell us what gay men are inevitably and naturally drawn to from some in-built disposition granted by their sexuality, but it

*does tell us of the way that a social-sexual identity has been understood and felt in a certain period of time. Looking at, listening to Garland may get us inside how gay men have lived their experience and situation, have **made** sense of them.* (p 194)

There are all too few texts to match Dyer's sensitive study of the passionate identification of a particular marginalised audience with 'their' star. But I remain unconvinced that it is sufficient to qualify Garland's appeal as 'camp', without at least some attempt to theorise the term beyond vague notions of exaggeration, theatricality, self-parody, or 'the reality of the pretence of illusion' (p 186). Reading *Heavenly Bodies* I recalled the story which James Baldwin tells in *The Devil Finds Work* about the way in which he achieved some degree of confidence about his own looks after hearing Bette Davis, whom he thought he resembled, described as beautiful. The question of identification – its nature and its conditions – lies absolutely at the heart of the film star phenomenon. Only as



Judy Garland as the girl-next-door in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) . . .

complex and sophisticated a cinema culture as that which existed in Hollywood could provide the circumstances in which such intricate and complicated figures as Hepburn, Davis, Garbo or Garland could emerge, able to articulate and dramatise massive cultural contradictions concerning class, gender, sexuality and so on. Thus I regret that Richard Dyer is unable to incorporate the theoretical insights provided by the work of Andrew Britton into his own project, just as I regret that Britton is unable to step down in his writings from the mandarin manner of contemporary 'high' theory, to learn something from Dyer's charm and openness. As things stand we have the curious situation of two important film critics, utterly opposed in style and temperament, working in exactly the same area as if the other didn't exist.

In conclusion, I found myself wishing that Dyer had published the sections on Monroe and Robeson as articles or separate monographs, since they are both more or less self-sufficient

pieces. This would have left him free to write a much more expansive and substantial book about Judy Garland, with room to explore the pressing question of how and why different audiences identify so intensely with different stars. Garland's lasting appeal depends on a set of closely contingent qualities – the sense of 'making the best of a bad job', of 'going back to pick up the pieces', of the most heroic and defiant assertion of the individual's right to love and be loved. These are not trivial themes, and in the brutal wastes of late twentieth century film culture it is hardly surprising that she should continue to represent a uniquely sympathetic figure, condensing and analogising the intensely private experience of the marginalised in the public world of commercial mass entertainment.

This capacity to restage the divisions of the social world through performance has guaranteed the longevity of Hollywood's stars; into a period in which changes in the studio system have made it much harder for actors to establish and develop



... and as the ill-fated lover in *A Star Is Born* (1954).

complex cinematic personae. This is not, however, to accept Andrew Britton's recent sweeping argument that we have now witnessed 'the virtual disappearance of significant work from Hollywood cinema'³. According to this reading, the project of contemporary Hollywood cinema is uniformly and overwhelmingly reactionary, and allows no space whatsoever for cultural and political conflict, once worked out through the operations of a stable genre system at the level of, among other factors, counter-textual performances. While it is obvious that the central figures of Steven Spielberg's or George Lucas's films do not admit of much psychological complexity, it does not automatically follow that the films themselves are seamless texts of impossibly sinister consequence. On the contrary, it seems that the site of counter-textual meaning has shifted to the level of the narrative, as in the excessive desire of the young hero of *Back to the Future* to escape from a '50s USA which is offered in the very image of Reaganite familial fantasies concerning the 'good old days'. Britton also grossly underestimates the possibilities for displaced and open-ended

identifications at work in the final scenes of *Close Encounters*, as well as the film's careful positioning of the US military and secret services as fundamentally anti-democratic forces, however naive Spielberg's ultimate vision of democracy might be.

Nonetheless, it is clear that audiences who have made sense of their lives in relation to the old star system will undoubtedly continue to feel a great loyalty to those figures with whom they have achieved such passionate and sometimes revelatory identifications. In this context I am reminded of the situation which Peter Brown describes so eloquently in his study of the survival of pagan culture in the world of late antiquity:

*In the stars at night, the gods had found shapes more suitable to their impassive eternity than perishable human statues. For, in the stars, the diffracted colours of earth were concentrated into a steady, imperturbable glow. The stars and the planets swung safely over the heads of the last pagans, glittering statues of the gods far removed from the vandalism of the monks.*⁴

Just as the gods of paganism continued to embody values of social and psychic diversity and complexity in opposition to the dismal Manichaean verities of Christianity, so the star system continues to offer an intimate and profound mode of expression for the conflicts of our times.

³ Andrew Britton, 'Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment', *Movie* no 31-32, 1987, pp 1-42.

⁴ Peter Brown, *The World Of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1971, pp 79-80.



**New Media, New Curricula
SEFT DAY SCHOOL
AND CONFERENCE
Liverpool Polytechnic
Saturday 19th September 1987**

Registration 10.30 am. School 11.00-5.30

SEFT'S ANNUAL EDUCATION

Conference this year moves to Liverpool with a new agenda and a new format to meet the new challenges of the late eighties. Rather than a conference as such, this year we will be using the format of a day-school to investigate new routes for development.

The Day School will provide a range of workshops on other media than those, such as mainstream film and television, traditionally associated with media studies. Photography, radio, pop music, print media and independent video and film will be addressed in day-long strand sessions. Their

overall aim will be to assess the extent to which approaches developed in film and television studies are adequate to and useful for the study of these other media, and to investigate concepts, pedagogies and resources.

In particular the school will address the constraints and opportunities offered by examination syllabuses for the study of the media, especially the GCSE, which will be the subject of two extra strands during the day. Also under discussion will be new ways of working with the cultural industries, and regional strategies to develop the network of Media Education Initiatives groups throughout the UK in conjunction with other national and regional organisations and enterprises.

Social events will be organised on Friday and Saturday nights. Delegates requiring overnight accommodation will be asked to pay for this separately, although SEFT will organise booking. Morning coffee and afternoon tea are provided. and delegates will be offered a cash buffet lunch.

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WET MULLET OR RED HERRING?

BY JOHN HARTLEY

There's no such thing as bad publicity, so it is with gratitude that I acknowledge the honour done to *Making Sense of the Media*¹: a seven-page review in *Screen* is better than a slap in the face with a wet mullet. However, after the lashing administered by Cary Bazalgette's 'Making Sense for Whom?'², I think I might have preferred the mullet – not only did I feel well and truly battered, but, more important, I detected in the reasoning and rhetoric of that review something very fishy indeed.

There is a maxim which circulates among operatives of the Central Intelligence Agency. It is the modern-day equivalent of Izaak Walton's famous advice to would-be cooks: 'First catch your Fish'. What CIA operatives say to each other, when seeking approval from politicians and public alike for their covert operations, is this: 'First create your Enemy'. In Bazalgette's review, *Making Sense of the Media* is the enemy; but, like other small and insignificant enemies, it is presented to the world as merely the mouthpiece for a greater, more dangerous and more shadowy adversary. *Making Sense* is a mere Nicaragua, a close but relatively trivial foe. Behind it, Russia-like, lurks the nightmare of an evil empire, a superpower hungry for dominion over all that 'we' hold dear. The ultimate enemy, for the review, is nothing less than Sociology.

According to the review, what is 'central' to our project in *Making Sense* is 'the establishment of

Sociology – and Sociology in Higher Education at that – as the fountainhead of all knowledge about the media' (p 34). To that end, it seems, we:

want to argue that, as English has become hopelessly corrupted by evaluative and discriminatory criticism, the only hope for a proper study of the media is to let Sociology dictate how it may be done. (p 34)

Dictators are among those Bad Things of history that ought not to exist, and so, according to the logic of Bazalgette's review:

The most hopeful thing that can be said about Making Sense is that, as befits its size, weight and price, it may function as a tombstone, a marker on the end of an era. The era in which a single academic discipline seeks to lay exclusive claim to Media Studies is ready for burial. . . . (p 36)

Unfortunately for the logic of this argument, the only alternative to the 'single academic discipline' of Sociology that is offered in the

¹ John Hartley, Holly Goulden, Tim O'Sullivan, *Making Sense of the Media*, London, Comedia, 1985.

² Cary Bazalgette, 'Making Sense for Whom?', *Screen* September-October 1986, vol 27 no 5, pp 30-36. (Page references in the text refer to this review unless otherwise indicated.)

review is another single academic discipline, namely English. It is *astonishing*, in these days of attacks from the New Right on the Humanities in general and Sociology in particular, to find a so-called radical journal and a self-styled radical review trotting out this paranoid nonsense about Sociology. Worse, it is dangerous, tending to give aid and comfort to those who would indeed like to 'dictate' to intellectual institutions – those who would not only be rid of Sociology ('socialism' to their eyes), but who would clean up English too.

For, of course, like Sociology, English is by no means a 'single' academic discipline. In both domains, there are contending theories, practices, pedagogies, parties. However, from the commanding heights of English, the review might easily be taken as justifying the expulsion of 'the socially significant' (p 34) from English in favour of more comfortable concerns like 'fictional forms, pleasure and aesthetics' (p 35). In short, 'Sociology' is a red herring – Bazalgette's real enemy is the one that Mrs Thatcher likes to call the enemy within; in this case 'studying representation and ideology' (p 34) *within* English. Here the review places itself firmly within what Terence Hawkes has identified as:

A kind of smouldering hysteria [that] has been no stranger to the field of academic literary criticism in Britain for the last fifty years and more. Accusations, denunciations, reports of traitors and double-agents are not unknown. It is almost as if a way of life were under siege.

In fact, throughout its institutional life in formal education, English has been the chosen field on which that siege is entrenched, a kind of Psy Ops behind the lines of democratisation, popular culture and decolonisation. So, as Hawkes argues:

Current talk of a 'crisis' in English neglects that history. There is no crisis in English. There was and is a crisis which created English and of which it remains a distinctive manifestation: a child of Empire's decline, we might say, by America out of Russia.³

In such a context, it is dangerous to create too many enemies at once. English, as Bazalgette acknowledges, 'has changed and is changing, not least through encounters with structuralism,

cultural studies and media theory' (p 34). Preoccupied with such encounters, embattled English teachers might be forgiven for seeing the sociological not as a necessary ally and reinforcement, but an adversary, plotting what the review actually calls a 'coup' (p 34) to capture Media Studies – a territory that English has evidently marked out for its own: 'Most of the Media Studies I know about is being done by English teachers' (p 34). They might be forgiven but not by the Right, which likes nothing better than factionalism among radical groups. In short, the review plays straight into the hands of Thatcherite educational policies (destroy Sociology), and straight into the hands of 'reactionary' (p 36) forces within English, not least by employing the same rhetoric of 'smouldering hysteria' that the review identifies in itself as 'emotional turmoil' (p 30). It's an emotional turmoil that takes the form of smear tactics; a campaign of invective and vilification against *Making Sense* and its authors: we are accused of 'outrageous misconstructions' (p 30), 'temerity' (p 31), 'ineptitude' (p 33), 'quite staggeringly naive misreading' (p 34), 'arrogance and ignorance' (p 34), 'silliness' (p 35), and so on.

The trouble with such rhetoric is that it is atheoretical; it returns Bazalgette's review to a position which she claims was 'discarded' in the 1970s:

Part of the politics of that period was precisely to discard 'atheoretical' notions that were being used to justify a contempt for politics and for history. (p 36)

Quite so, but in its contempt for *Making Sense* the review also discards the structuralist enterprise. Instead of polysemy, multi-acculturality and the notion of multiple potential readings of a given text, it offers the fixed, correct reading which can identify 'misreadings' and 'misconstructions'. It also discards the notion that 'the real' is a discursive construct, by being quite certain that its position is real while ours – it follows – is not: 'In reality, much that is promised is not delivered . . .' (p 30); 'The authors never confront the *real* implications . . .' (p 35); 'This

³ Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespearean Rag*, London and New York, Methuen, 1986, p 122.

saves them from having to answer the *really* radical demands . . . ' (p 35) [my emphases], and so on. And the review discards theories of authorship, being content to locate the source of perceived textual features in the bodies and personalities of us, the authors: our 'assertions' are (among other things) 'side-swipes' which are 'engendered' by our 'arrogance and ignorance' (p 34).

It seems to me that abandoning theoretical ground that has been gained, even within the domain of English, in favour of a strategy of looking for enemies across the border, indicates merely a desire to keep English 'pure'. For *Making Sense* is not 'Sociology', and it is not plotting a 'coup' against English. On the contrary, it identifies in Media Studies a need to use 'a wide variety of disciplinary approaches' ('Introduction', p 9); and it places Media Studies in that period when, at least in Public Sector Higher Education, 'the twin ideologies of interdisciplinarity and utility' held sway:

New courses in Communication, Cultural and Media Studies were set up, in which renegade literary critics were forced into contact (and even shared rooms!) with sociologists, psychologists, linguists, historians, information technologists, political economists, ex-broadcasting professionals and film and video technicians. Media Studies developed out of this odd and often accidental mixture – multi-disciplinary certainly, but also anti-disciplinary – it was founded and has remained as a controversial, critical area of study, which not only encourages a politicized critique of the media themselves, but also of academic, disciplinary and institutional dispositions of power. ('Introduction', p 8)

That does not describe a 'coup' by Sociology against English, but rather an attempt to work against and beyond such boundaries, towards an 'increasingly confident cross-fertilization of ideas and methods across both academic disciplines and intellectual movements', in the name, not of this discipline or that, but of a new configuration called *Media Studies*.

However, even this is made to look like poaching from someone's private pond by Bazalgette, for, apart from the creation of enemies, she is also in the business of creating friends. Throughout, there is an implied

addressee, an obvious, commonsensical community of insiders for and to whom the review speaks. This community is the 'we' that is not so much royal as imperialist: the *we* of 'what we used to call "the willing suspension of disbelief"' (p 35); of 'as we know, the key question that has bedevilled these areas for the last twelve years' (p 33); of 'but just because we may have been right . . . ' (p 36). It transpires, in the last paragraph of the review, that this 'we' amounts to a few cronies in and around Old Compton Street – despite dissensions that may prevail within and between the BFI, SEFT and Screen – who think they've got the exclusive licence to fish in the waters of Media Studies. The reviewer proclaims:

I've heard it said – in fact I'd better come clean and say that I heard it said in SEFT's office – that 'the theory was all done in the '70s – all we have to do now is work out how to teach it'. (p 36)

And so 'we' come to the crux of the matter: bugger the theory; the flavour of this month is teaching. And it is here that Bazalgette snatches defeat from the jaws of victory. It may well be that 'pedagogy', plus the review's two other sacred, er, cattle, namely 'aesthetics' and 'production', are important matters, and it may well be that they are addressed in ways open to criticism in *Making Sense*. But just because 'we' in SEFT's office claim to 'know' the theory, and the 'key questions' of the decade, it does not follow that such matters are equally transparent to the teachers of, say, South Wales, New South Wales, or even South London come to that. Witness, for instance, the scene where Bazalgette 'once observed a teacher confidently embarking on the *Bad News* thesis' with a 'group of recalcitrant third years' (p 35). It seems the unfortunate teacher's confidence soon evaporated – he was 'flummoxed' by the students' response. But the reviewer was flummoxed too: 'It's harder to imagine why he [the teacher] didn't know that class, like other social categories, will inflect readings' (p 35). Even under the Foucauldian surveillance of the Theoretical Bazalgette, the poor bloke was unable to impress his students with more than just 'another sociological chestnut' (p 35). (Here, in parenthesis, let me add: first, that the *Bad News* work is by no means

a 'chestnut', no matter what else it might be; and second, that what was 'rolled out' in *Making Sense* was not a rehash of the *Bad News* thesis, but a reference to my own *Understanding News*⁴, which is not sociological at all, but written from a semiotic and cultural perspective.)

The lesson is clear. What teachers – not to mention their 'observers' – need is a useful summary of the kind of theoretical work which takes account of both the institutional and the textual productivity of the media, together with the complex relations that have been established between a given medium and its socially structured audiences. What they need, in fact, is *Making Sense of the Media*, Block Three, Unit Two, 'Audiences and Identities', pages 25-33, where the 'inflection' of readings by 'class' and other social categories (e.g., gender) is addressed directly, and in detail. Part of the argument runs as follows:

Although audiences are addressed as a mass audience of individuals-in-families-in-the-nation, they do not act in this way. . . . There's a difference between the media's image of their audience . . . and the cultural practices of those who encounter the media in their daily lives. . . . If we look at the context of reception . . . we find, instead, a complex network of interlocking subcultures, meaning-systems, audience constituencies and sense-making practices. . . . But the link between overall social structures on the one hand and people's perceptual, discursive and sense-making habits on the other hand is not a direct, mechanistic link. In other words, although social class determines cultural competence and discursive resources, it doesn't equal them. (ibid, pp 25-7)

And so on. Instead of scorning the 'flummoxed' teacher and the 'sociological chestnut' alike, Bazalgette would have done well to interrogate her own 'pedagogy': one where the students are 'recalcitrant' (p 33, 35); the teachers are 'disconsolate' (p 33); the paradigm instance of teaching is 'any fourth or fifth year secondary – classroom on a Friday afternoon' (p 32); and the best that can be said for teachers' materials (in the form of news clips on video) is that they are 'nice' (p 35). What a 'wasteland' (p 33) indeed, and no wonder, with 'observers' such as the reviewer sneering from the back.

Of course, the passage quoted above from

Making Sense will not do as classroom material. Nor was it so designed. The review rightly notes that 'the booklets do not constitute a course that can be taught, but a range of background possibilities for classroom work which *you* then have to construct . . . into a teachable course' (p 31), and, therefore, that 'the job of fitting all this theory into all those classrooms is simply handed over to the (overworked, underpaid) teacher' (p 33). Well, yes – isn't that what teachers are *for*? It is not our job to tell professional teachers how to do theirs. We did see it as our job, however, to bring to their attention in a coherent and accessible form some of the major theoretical work that has not only 'bedevilled' (p 33) higher education and the specialist journals for the last twelve or more years, but has also too often been couched in unremittingly opaque language that – as '*we know*' – puts off teachers quicker than 'a few jaundiced reviews' (p 36) in *Screen*, a journal that was in its heyday one of the chief culprits.

However, what *Screen* can get away with is one thing; but for those who would try to explain what the hell it, among others, has been on about, the Thought Police are waiting. Apparently now it's even a crime to address teachers (a graduate profession) by means of the 'pedagogy of higher education: the assemblage of texts, the presentation of argument, the demonstration with examples, the concluding discussion' (p 34). Despite the fact that *Screen* has been doing just this for years, it is dismissed by Bazalgette as 'a relentlessly authoritarian and one-way transaction' (p 34). And woe betide anyone outside Old Compton Street who tries to 'deal with notoriously slippery concepts in media studies: industry and audience' (p 33). Even the order in which it is permissible to teach Media Studies is pre-ordained: 'I don't know any media teachers who'd have the temerity to *start* a media course with gender representation' (p 31).

Well, perhaps Bazalgette should go to, say, South Wales and meet some teachers, whose 'temerity' is such that they're willing to tackle difficult issues as they arise; i.e., from the *start*.

⁴ John Hartley, *Understanding News*, London and New York, Methuen, 1982.

120 On second thoughts, however, this wouldn't be such a good idea. What teachers don't need right now is to be 'observed' by those who would deny them access to the very theories that the reviewer believes were 'all done' ten years ago. Nor do they need to be massaged into thinking that Sociology is a dictator, or that teachers are incapable of following an argument and creating their own 'spaces for questioning, opposition and alternative versions' (p 34). What they need, instead, is a way of integrating an understanding of both the social and the textual, both the institutional and the pleasurable, both the political and the popular. And that is just what *Making Sense* offers.

Bazalgette concludes with a lengthy quotation from Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory*. It is invoked to conjure up the review's preferred alternative agenda for Media Studies to the one offered in *Making Sense*. The catchwords – apart from pedagogy – are 'aesthetics' and 'production'. Eagleton is said to be making 'really radical demands' (p 35) in a passage where he is quoted as suggesting, in respect of 'aesthetics':

It may also be valuable to use literature to foster in them [children] a sense of linguistic potential denied to them by their social conditions.

And in respect of 'production':

*You may want to stage your own signifying practices.*⁵

With all due respect to Eagleton, who in this context is produced as what we used to call a *deus ex machina* to provide a shonky script with a plausible ending, neither of these proposals seems to me to be necessarily 'radical'. In deft hands, it may be possible to foster 'linguistic potential' without provoking in the students the very notions of cultural deprivation that have bedevilled English and other Arts teaching for donkey's years. But equally, such a policy, of equating 'social conditions' with 'linguistic potential', especially when this is glossed as 'literature', opens the way for the evaluative and discriminatory branch of the High Culture brigade to enter Media Studies by the back door. It tends to confirm the idea that the 'great tradition' is still, despite all, just that, and that

the linguistic potential of non-literary forms of communication – especially those of the media – which the children are most certainly *not* denied, isn't worth fostering.

As for production, the same applies. 'Staging your own signifying practices' may be radical, but it may not. It may be simply an ideologically sound way of describing what we used to call creative writing. Furthermore, such a formula offers very little to *Media Studies*, where 'production' takes on a very different connotation. Here, production means many things, as the sample course outlined at the end of *Making Sense* is careful to point out:

Practical production work . . . may include the production of a newspaper or magazine, audience survey, content analysis, local media research, semiotic analysis, role simulation, etc., as well as video/film-making and radio scriptwriting and/or production. Crucially, practical work is seen as an integral part of the course. (Block Three, Unit Three, p 22)

Despite the fact that *Literary Theory* is about literary theory, Bazalgette makes it seem as though Eagleton has answered the questions that *Making Sense* has failed to pose; simultaneously suggesting that we've plagiarised Eagleton, by a 'quick-fire summary of the first chapter' (p 34) which we 'draw upon so happily' (p 36). Sadly, I have to report that I've never read that particular chapter, but nevertheless, it's a fair cop – a 'quick-fire summary' is there right enough, but it is a summary of an article co-written by a number of people, including two of the authors of *Making Sense*, which appeared before *Literary Theory* was published.⁶ This is merely to point out that there have been attempts, including our own, to come to terms with some of the theoretical issues that Bazalgette implies have never been considered. These attempts have been going on, albeit unnoticed by the Thought Police of Old Compton Street, for quite a while. So, when Bazalgette signs off by seeking to redress her own

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, p 212.

⁶ John Beynon, Brian Doyle, Holly Goulden, John Hartley, 'The Politics of Discrimination: Media Studies in English Teaching', *English in Education*, Autumn 1983, pp 3-14.

constituency's neglect of certain issues, I can only concur:

But just because we may have been right then, does not mean that aesthetics, production and pedagogy will never be needed, cannot be theorised. If we really want to make sense of the media, we need these theories too. (p 36)

And so say all of 'us'. But whereas Bazalgette offers no such theorisation, *Making Sense* does at least have a go, concluding that teachers should 'encourage the growth of more and different ways of using the media both creatively and critically', and that Media Studies in schools ought to be used 'both to extend the knowledge and understanding of how to "read" the media, and

to hasten the day when their resources can be used as an autonomous means of communication much more widely' (Introduction, p 25). Such a project may be Utopian (as Eagleton says), but if it fails, 'it should not be the fault of teachers, whose prime "concern" is with the widest possible development of people's capacity to make sense' (ibid, pp 25-6). There is, in short, plenty of work to do, and there's more than one way of doing it, room for more than one hand on deck. It does not help the 'radical' cause espoused by Bazalgette to muddy the waters by chucking in a load of red herrings. The consequences of so doing may be serious, especially if the reviewer believes that, having supposedly disposed of the circling sharks of Sociology, it's now safe to go back in the water.

LETTERS

From André Frankovits, Sydney, Australia:

Life is full of little surprises.

Three years ago, for example, Jean Baudrillard came to Australia to tell us that 'The Year 2000 Will Not Take Place'. As a small business man about town, I distributed his books for money, and, for fun, I edited one myself around his scenarios.¹ At the same time, I was able to distribute *Screen*, which doesn't have a lot to do with Baudrillard but sold in much the same sorts of shops.

In spite of Baudrillard, times do seem to move on. I have had to resign, regretfully, as distributor of *Screen* in Australia. The average number of copies of any issue I could expect to sell in the whole of Australia had dropped to something like 30 – maybe 50 after months had passed. In fact in the sorts of shops that still sell Baudrillard books, *Screen* was barely selling at all. And some issues, like the 1985 one on *Screen Acting* [vol 26 no 5] didn't sell at all in any sort of shop.

In Australia, as in most Western countries, these are not great days for the forces of truth, justice and enlightenment. We haven't yet adjusted very well to having a Labour government that deregulates the economy, resumes uranium sales to France after terrorist acts by France against neighbouring New Zealand, reneges on aboriginal land rights, tries to dismantle ethnic special-broadcasting and education programmes, endorses the Indonesian invasion of Timor, supports World Bank loans to the Pinochet regime, and (most recently as I write) allows Rupert Murdoch to move towards gaining a 75% control of all metropolitan newspapers in the country.

This creates a funny climate in which anything can happen in the name of the Left. It's a strange new world – and somehow *Screen* doesn't seem to describe it.

The Left in general isn't really something that you can talk about here any more, not even as a sentimental association binding people of a

certain age. On the whole, only English people in Australia seem able to still ask about The Left in quite that same old way. There are a fair few members of the English Left here, though, and one of the strange-new-world factors seems to be an inordinate number of Left academics wandering round Australia but talking about Birmingham.

I think that this probably creates a bit of a problem for the student reception of magazines like *Screen*. It's a credibility problem about politics, really. Not about Birmingham politics in Birmingham, but about invoking 'Birmingham' as an ideal for Australian students, while settling down in excellent jobs in Sydney, Hobart or Brisbane. This academic *décalage* does make it harder to promote British theory in bookshops where readers without much money can follow their own interests. I've nothing whatsoever against Birmingham myself, but I suspect that it's bad for Australian sales.

But I think it would be a mistake, or maybe part of the Birmingham-effect, to take any of this as evidence for a decline of politics in Australia. It's more that the *idea* of The Left is assumed to be in question here, in a way that isn't really reflected by a journal like *Screen*. Questioning the idea of the Left and also the traditional *ideas* of the Left isn't necessarily a backward move when every day the newspaper brings some new and often unpleasant little surprise.

There is much more widespread interest in film study than there was five years ago, but not in the way that *Screen* does it. I must say, as your friendly ex-distributor, that there are very particular problems with selling *Screen* today. There are problems selling anything of course, especially since the Australian dollar's value has dropped to what's known locally as 'Pacific peso' status. And I have not been a very imaginative

¹ The lecture was given at the *Futur*fall* Conference, Sydney University, 1984. The book was *Seduced and Abandoned, The Baudrillard Scene*, Sydney, Stonemoss, 1984.

distributor lately – I work full-time now for Amnesty International and recently gave up small business altogether for lack of time to pursue it. But nevertheless, even in this climate, just about anything sells better and quicker than *Screen* no matter how expensive it is. (Except possibly *Framework*.)

Why is this so? I offer the following observations based on my own impressions of the journal and on purely practical experience of dealing with customers (readers, teachers who might be persuaded to use it for courses, book-sellers, etc). I do not have the training or the wish to justify my impressions theoretically, but I assume that in this case that's all right because people don't cancel their orders theoretically either.

Screen has become a desperately depressing object to deal with. It is perceived fairly widely now as parochial, repetitive, punitive and grim. This comes not only from people who remember the great days of *Screen*'s inventiveness with theory, but people coming to film study now who were babies during the good old days and couldn't care less about them. I shall try to explain this image in more detail.

Screen isn't parochial because it deals more narrowly now with practical matters in Britain than it used to do. It's parochial because it talks to readers as though those British matters were universal and as though *Screen*'s way of talking about them should be universal too. This is hard to explain. But there is a uniquely 'British'² feeling about a certain way of insisting upon race/class/gender which assumes that British experiences of these things can be the model for understanding racism/capitalism/ sexism everywhere in the Western world. Other places just have local variations (e.g., of 'The Left'), and so the British way of talking about them makes sense everywhere. But it isn't so, and it doesn't work. As we say in French, *ça cloche*.

The result is somehow to take interest *away* from British matters for well-disposed foreigners, rather than to create it. *Screen*'s Britain just doesn't feel real. For example, flipping through *Screen* myself, I always feel not only that the eccentricities of British class culture are assumed to be the same as capitalism itself, but that the ideal model for 'Left' activism in general is a black woman worker with a Liverpool accent.

Preferably throwing off subjection by realist aesthetics in a film study course.

In saying this I mean no disrespect to *real* black working women with Liverpool accents. In fact, working as I do for an international human rights organisation, I find that part of the difficulty in mobilising members of the 'Left' here is getting them to feel any interest for genuine difference, rather than ideal models of it. Try stirring up the Australian culture-study Left about untrendy countries like Sri Lanka or over-saturated ones like Afghanistan and Chile.

But it's the same problem on both sides – parochialism. And the trouble with *Screen*'s assumptions is that the ideal models only fit a small bit of reality now. Australia barely has a class culture in that intense British way (though it does have a class society). The 'universal' Rupert Murdoch, for example, isn't really a product of British class culture – he just knows how to exploit it. Our multi-millionaire mining, beer, food and company-takeover barons aren't products of it either, and neither is their political style. Yet they are today, because of the ways that capitalism works, part of a multi-national problem. Same thing for the model of the activist. Any black women workers with Liverpool accents in Australia are caught up in battles over the ideology of multiculturalism, which is not like British racism, though the battles (especially for Asians) are nonetheless viciously racist. Different aboriginal communities are in another situation again – one that takes us back to the post-ocker capitalists when land rights claims interfered with uranium mining. And that takes us straight to The Bomb (not a parochial problem).

I think that lots of people feel we need new ways of thinking to deal with these things, and that's where *Screen*'s repetitiveness comes in. When you open it up, the article titles already give the standard answers about race/class/gender – representation/ideology/subjectivity. That's why even when *Screen* diversifies and tries to talk about art, TV, music-video, it doesn't

² I must thank Meaghan Morris for her suggestion that I put scare quotes around 'British' here. She says that without them I will be committing essentialism and idealism.

attract new audiences because the analyses are always the same. It's like a cracked record, and the newly simplified language in recent issues really doesn't help. It makes it feel even more routine, even more like a school textbook.

On to the 'punitive' and 'grim'. There's something very *punishing* about reading *Screen* by an act of free choice rather than being forced to by a course. I'm afraid that the drawing on the cover of the 1986 *Pedagogy* issue [vol 27 no 5] summed it up, with a stern Victorian schoolmaster flailing about with a stick. That's what reading *Screen* usually feels like. I don't know why this is the case, though I think it may have something to do with what is (to my taste) a particularly ghastly combination in its pages of psychoanalysis and workerism.

To each their own. But one thing I can say that is not merely based on personal prejudice is that *Screen* doesn't sell in shops to the public because it has no sense of itself as a commodity. *Screen* has no feel for commodity fetishism. *Screen* has no sass.

British readers may feel that this is a good thing. But I'm not sure about that. One thing I am quite sure about after a few years distributing small journals is that 'Theory' of almost any sort is now a basic item of consumption for the thinking yuppie. It's what they put on their coffee tables, and what they read in bed. The American publication *Zone* is pretty much the standard attractive product in this context. Perhaps there aren't any yuppies in Britain, though looking at *The Face* or at English music-video it seems hard to imagine that there aren't aspirants to the condition.

There's no reason why *Screen* should be written for yuppies, and maybe every reason why not (though what thinking yuppies think can matter a lot for some campaigns). But the point is that people who aren't yuppies themselves go to thinking-yuppie bookshops to buy or steal their Theory. Once it's in there, *Screen* looks terrible.

It simply isn't competitive. Or if the word 'competitive' is offensive, I'd say that it 'doesn't offer an effective alternative' to the context in which it circulates. So it gathers dust, and gets ignored.

I think it's a pity, and I don't entirely accept the emphasis that my friends from the British-Left-in-Australia place on the extreme particularities of Thatcherism to account for the inward-looking air around journals like *Screen*. I think it must also have something to do with the traditions of the British Left.

Because 'Thatcherism' as a programme and a philosophy is really rather expansive. There are elements of it here in the Labour government, and even more elements massing in Opposition. There is also something simultaneous and new and *connected* about the media-conscious regimes of Thatcher, Reagan, Hawke, Chirac, Waldheim, Nakasone, etc, that you don't get a sense of in *Screen*, no matter how much 'politics' is talked. Instead there's a sense of nostalgia. As though while for most people the year 2000 still gets closer and closer, Baudrillard may yet be right about some contexts. For *Screen*, the year 2000 will *not* take place, if it heads on back to the 1930s.

This is desperately depressing.

But at Amnesty International we make a set of tea-towels marked in bright colours, WHERE THERE'S HOPE THERE'S LIFE. Using one of these the other night, it occurred to me that maybe the simple trouble with *Screen* for the casual interested reader here is that it doesn't really brim with hope. Hope depends a lot upon little surprises, especially in dark times – and there aren't enough of them in *Screen* (let alone any big ones).

However in ending my pleasant professional association with the publication, I must say that personally I continue to feel the confident hope that its life may be long, and that you will one day surprise us all . . .

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